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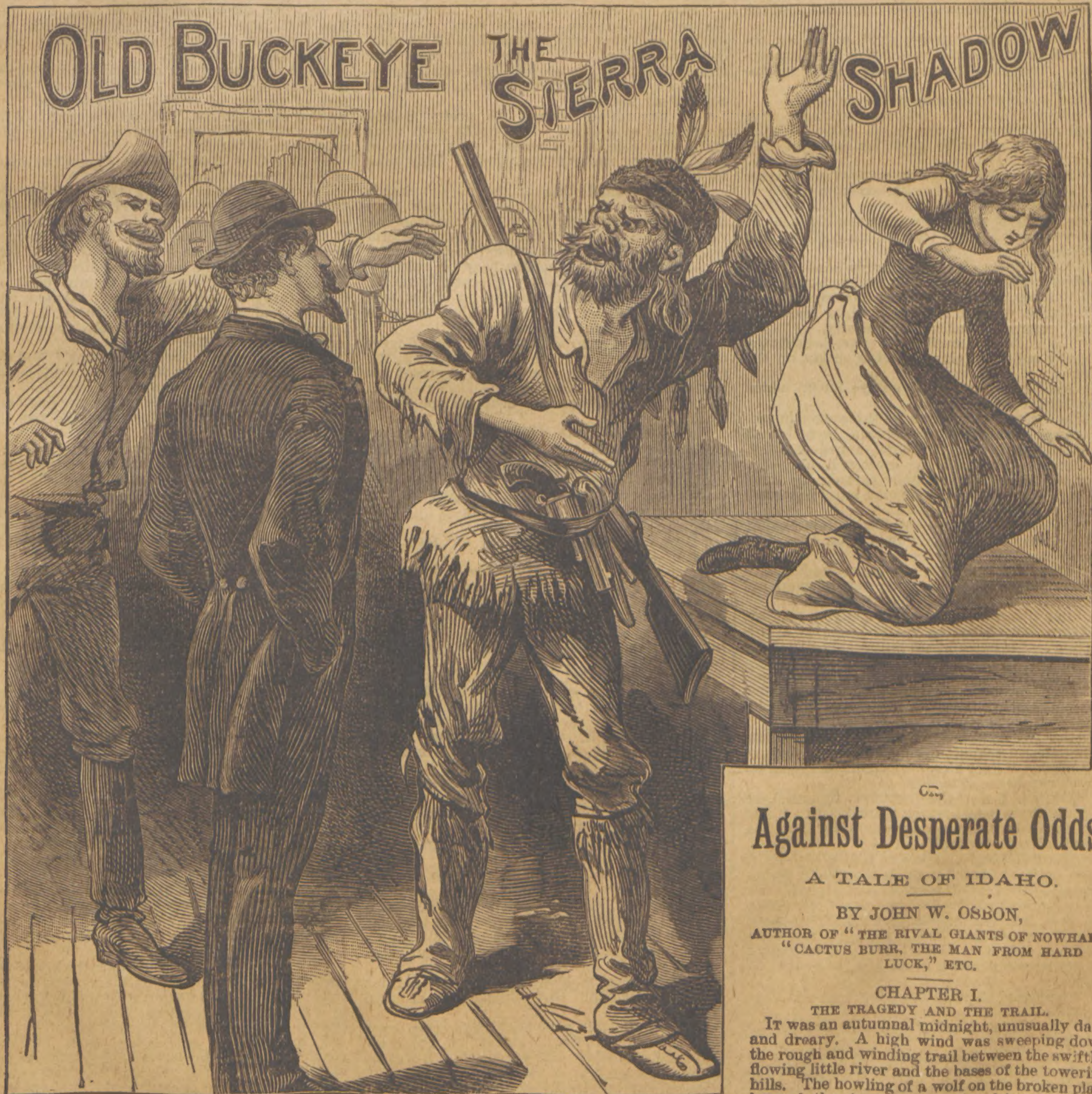
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"WHO BIDS? WHO BIDS? A MIS'ABUL THOUSAN' FUR THET PURTY CRITTER! WAUGH!"

Against Desperate Odds.

A TALE OF IDAHO.

BY JOHN W. OSBON,

AUTHOR OF "THE RIVAL GIANTS OF NOWHAR,"
"CACTUS BURR, THE MAN FROM HARD
LUCK," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE TRAGEDY AND THE TRAIL.

It was an autumnal midnight, unusually dark and dreary. A high wind was sweeping down the rough and winding trail between the swiftly-flowing little river and the bases of the towering hills. The howling of a wolf on the broken plain beyond the river, the occasional hooting of an owl sweeping through space, the faint chirping

and piping of countless insects, the wind's shrill whistle, the river's soft and musical ripple—parts of Nature's grand voice, one and all—alone broke the dismal nocturnal quietude, and robbed the narrow trail of the weirdness and grimness locked in brooding and midnight silence.

A horse and rider, their blended outlines just discernible under the pall of darkness, crept slowly along the trail—a spectral Centaur, whose movements were marked by just a suspicion of the sound of falling hoofs.

Onward, at a slow, unvarying gait, stole the shade; onward, until the trail veered outward to the water's edge, to round a protruding spur in the range.

Then halted—a smothered imprecation accompanying the action.

An iron hand had closed upon the nostrils of the silent steed, while against the face of its rider were focused the rays of a dark lantern!

From each side of the trail a man in mask had glided forward, and the cocked revolver of each bore full upon the breast of the horseman.

Muscular-looking fellows, disguised beyond recognition, they were, and the cold gleam in their eyes was as pitiless as death.

A moment sped by in silence unbroken save by the restless champing of the horse; then a light, sardonic laugh rippled from the lips of the men in the saddle.

"Now here's a pretty go!" he coolly observed, in the most matter-of-fact tone imaginable. "Say, hain't you galoots barkin' up the wrong tree?"

The leader of the masked trio chuckled.

"Nary a time!" he declared, positively. "A bluff won't work in this leetle game. You're our timber, an' we're goin' ter peel ye! Eh, lads?"

"Bet yer pile!" promptly avowed his fellows.

"Fact is, major, we've bin expectin' yo' fer a week past," continued the man with the lantern, a deal of satisfaction manifesting itself in his voice. "Kin ye see on t'other side o' ther knot-hole?"

The horseman slowly shook his head, a puzzled expression appearing on his handsome face.

The three road-agents laughed outright.

"Mebbe ye hain't Major Cool, ov ther Gold Bug," suggested the leader, ironically.

"An' ye hev'n't muffled yer critter's hoofs ter slide by unheard," chimed in the outlaw on the left.

"An' I reckon we hain't got ye lined," added the third.

The horseman stared at the three men in undisguised amazement a moment, then leaned back in the saddle and uttered a mellow laugh.

"Drunk or crazy," he muttered, his voice just audible, a peculiar smile parting his mustached lips. "In either event I must not cross them in their mad whims."

"Sensible," tersely said the outlaw leader, with a crisp nod. "An' now, major, a word to ther p'int."

"Ther Gold Bug, ther new gambling-hell, aire advertised ter begin work on ther suckers an' chumps ov ther Canyon ter-morrow night."

"In a live camp like Chispa Canyon, up thar, it takes dust—heaps ov it—ter keep ther keerds turnin'. An' we kalkilate yer pockets aire purty well lined with ther yellow stuff!"

"And that's some more of your business!" crisply returned the horseman, not the slightest trace of alarm or annoyance noticeable in voice or bearing.

"Jes' so," complacently affirmed the ruffian, a broad grin crinkling the close-fitting folds of his mask. "Fact aire, major, ye don't seem ter ketch onto who we be."

"Oh, yes, I do!" the horseman protested, his big blue eyes scintillating suspiciously. "And I'd make it confoundedly warm for you, too, but you've got me foul."

"That's all right. We aire not toll-takers ov ther common cloth," went on the ruffian, assuming an air of injured innocence, and paying not the slightest heed to the significant assurance. In fact, we aire agents of Captain Trackless, ther Terror ov ther Trail. Dust we aire after, an' dust we'll hev! Resist, an' thar's yer grave!" and a curt inclination of his head indicated the river.

"Agents of Captain Trackless!" echoed Major Cool.

"That's w'ot I said!" doggedly iterated the outlaw.

"And lied! The redoubtable Trackless has no hand in this matter! In a word, you are the hirelings of High-Card Hank, the Faro King, of Chispa Canyon!"

Not loudly, or with bluster, but in a cold, deadly monotone, the bold words fairly shot

from between the white, even teeth of the imperiled sport.

Bracing his feet firmly, as if to resist a desperate attack, the leader of the outlaw trio drew a hard breath. The effect upon his companions was equally marked.

But the looked-for resistance did not follow. On the contrary, Major Cool sat quite at ease in his saddle, his arms slightly akimbo, his jeweled hands resting lightly upon his hips, with the long, tapering fingers doubled under. His cold, white face wore a faint smile, the real significance of which was revealed only by the wicked sparkle in his eyes.

"Yes, sir, you lied," he reiterated. "And now, listen to a little plain talk."

"I am Major Cool—I don't go back on *that*. It's a good handle, and a clean one, compared with some I can call to mind—that of Bunco Ben, for instance. Do—"

A howl of rage from the ruffian with the lantern interrupted the sport.

"Hear that, pards!" he grated, his eyes gleaming viciously through the twin apertures of his mask, as he released the horse's nostrils and clapped his hand upon one of the revolver-butts protruding from his girdle. "It's ther river fer ther cuss now, even ef we do resk a taste of Jedge—"

"Slow and easy, friend Benjy," interpolated Major Cool, his quiet, incisive voice clear and distinct above the husky mumblings of the maddened road-agent; "don't crowd the mourners; there's time to settle up this little affair in decent style, even if the river beside us is to be the Styx of my journey."

"As the matter stands, we pretty nearly understand each other. You ducks want what good, solid coin of the realm I may chance to have upon my unfortunate person. Well, take *that*!"

A swift outward fling of the major's hands gave emphasis to the last word; more than that, for the glittering length of a small revolver appeared in each, while the sharp, spiteful cracking of the pair of trusty weapons completely drowned the even strains of his voice.

So dexterously, so swiftly executed was the maneuver, that the road-agent on either side fell back lifeless ere he could realize the true import of the turn affairs were taking!

And at the very instant the long white fingers of the major performed their deadly work, the rowels of his Mexican spurs urged forward his well-trained steed, dashing the leader of the outlaw trio in a senseless heap on the rocky trail.

The lantern fell with a splash into the waters of the stream, and over the strange scene the pall of darkness resumed its sway.

Again the Centaur shade stole noiselessly forward along the trail, heading straight for the twinkling lights of Chispa Canyon.

"D'ye heur, gal? Head up, an' face ther gang, or—"

A menacing gleam in the small, bloodshot eyes of the speaker, a significant uplifting of his clawish hand, filled the hiatus with an emphasis more brutal than words could have conveyed.

There was an uneasy shifting of the crowd; here and there a toil-stained hand dropped to a belted weapon.

"Come—*you*, Red Joaquin! No more of *that*, or something will drop—quick and hard!" icily enunciated a low, clear voice, the significant tapping of a revolver-butt accompanying the warning words. "Don't forget that this is the House of Gold, the resort of white men all wool and a yard wide."

"Use my tables for slave blocks—sell that helpless girl, if you will; but roughly touch a hair of that glorious head, and Chispa Canyon will no longer know your presence!"

A stifled oath, a snort of disgust; then—

"Neow, how d'ye git in, chippie? Hev'n't hurted ther purty critter a cent's wuth, hev I?" and, as he spoke, Red Joaquin turned savagely upon the sport, his villainous face aglow with wrath. "Jes' keep yer flimsy-wimpy paws off them thar tools, too, 'less ye mean biz! Naow, I'm a-talkin', High-Card—a-chookin' aout hoss-sense! Twig?"

The gambler nodded nonchalantly, a faint smile, indescribably sardonic, parting his thin lips.

Red Joaquin felt a strange chill creep over his massive form; just a thought of the color fled from the little of his face visible. His arms seemed to hang limp at his sides.

The spectators silently drew back.

The smile of High-Card Hank was accounted deadlier than the fabled Upas-tree.

The eyes of the two men met in a steady

glare—those of the rough, small and black, filled with the dull glow of intense rage; the sport's, now blue, then gray, and all-in-all singularly cat-like, cold, clear and piercing.

In marked contrast were the two belligerents, as they stood weapons in hand.

Scarcely more than five-feet-five was High-Card Hank, and agile rather than muscular; his short, black hair lay close to the skull in crisp little ringlets; his face was smooth and handsome, but at all times cold, and as white almost as a block of marble, the natural pallor being only heightened by the jetty blackness of his mustaches and imperial.

He was attired in a full-dress suit, and a girdle of richly-worked blue silk supported a pair of elegant-looking "tools."

As for Red Joaquin—six-feet-six did not exceed his altitude. His aspect was one of extreme repulsiveness. From soles to arm-pits his great form was a model of symmetry. There all shapeliness ended and hideousness began. Shoulders, back and chest were gnarled and twisted, as if by some awful accident, setting his short, thick neck awry, and bringing his face around almost over the left shoulder.

And such a face! Covered with a matted growth of sandy red whiskers befooled with tobacco-juice, it was simply brutish. The nose of rubicund hue bespoke habits most bitulous. The eyes were deep-set, small and black, and above the low, retreating forehead was a mass of long, tangled red hair.

A suit of tattered buckskin hid the nakedness of this repulsive wretch. Upon his head was a sort of turban of wolfskin, ornamented with waving eagle-plumes. At his back hung a Winchester rifle, which was reinforced by the pair of sixes in his hands.

Of High-Card Hank, the camp knew but little; of Red Joaquin it knew less.

The former had "struck the camp" at the twilight hour one evening three months before—coming no one knew whence—with his finances at the low ebb of a lone silver dollar. Ragged and hungry though he was, yet with light step and sportive mien he had headed direct for the Eureka Shades—reputed the biggest bank in Chispa Canyon—and by an almost fabulous run of luck had "bu'sted 'er wide open, an' laid Gentleman George out cold," as the Canyonites expressed it ever after.

No name beyond that of "Hank" had the nifty adventurer vouchsafed the denizens of the camp. Upon the high-card he had laid his heaviest wagers, and so in their free-and-easy way they had prefixed to his name the title of his favorite card.

The Eureka Shades was now the House of Gold. Gentleman George, the proprietor of the former, had gone the way of all flesh—had departed this life in strict accordance with the peculiar code of the isolated gold-camp. Detected in an attempt to work a "brace" on that eventful night, he had fallen before the deadly revolvers of the ragged adventurer.

Always cool and collected, ever as ready for a fight as for a frolic, with never a word of himself, of his past or his future, High-Card Hank in the three months immediately preceding the opening of my romance had worked out for himself the distinction of being, with possibly one exception, the worst man in the camp.

And that exception was Red Joaquin.

Loud-mouthed, abusive, vile in appearance and in manner, the deformed giant was the terror of the camp. Then, too, he was something of a mystery. Gold he had in plenty, and when he appeared in camp, bent upon one of his periodical "tears," the yellow god went right and left most lavishly.

Invariably he came and went between two days—a fact which had led to an end of idle speculation and to a general supposition that, somewhere back in the hills, he had struck a rich lead of the virgin metal, and was secretly working it for all it was worth.

From the day the giant had first set foot in Chispa Canyon, he had, to use the vernacular, "played a lone hand," and played it well, too. Foes he had in generous numbers, but of friends not one.

This particular night on which the herculean desperado is introduced to the reader, he had suddenly appeared in camp with the girl, whom he at once conducted to the House of Gold, and offered for sale to the highest bidder.

A high-handed proceeding, even for this roughest and most lawless of Idaho's gold-camps, and, but for High-Card Hank, the ruffian would have suffered vigorous punishment long ere the preliminaries of the atrocious barter had been arranged.

Realizing this full well—knowing that in a

Chispa Canyon he had not a friend to be depended upon—Red Joaquin mentally cursed his folly in having invoked the anger of High-Card Hank at so inopportune a time.

An odd shrug of his misshapen shoulders; a swift, restless flashing of his deep-set eyes over the motley throng; a singular twitching of his facial muscles; then a laugh, singularly soft and purring, yet indescribably chilling, rippled lowly through the tangled meshes of his mustaches.

"P'izen, hain't we, pard?" he muttered, the words marked with a series of deep chuckles. "Reckon we c'n'd eat each other an' not hafe try—but we won't!"

And, to the intense surprise of the assembled Canyonites, he with a swift, easy motion returned his weapons to his belt.

At this unexpected, but none the less diplomatic turn of affairs, the sport of the House of Gold bowed with studied grace, and answered airily:

"As sensible as ugly!"

A moment he looked straight into the burning black eyes of the crippled Hercules, his own doll-like orbs filled with a greenish glint, boding ill to the latter, then quietly put up his revolvers, and in cold, hard strains continued:

"A truce to senseless horse-play, Joaquin. Who or what this girl is—whether your kith or kin, or a stolen mountain beauty—is nothing to me. You have brought her here to find a buyer. Confine yourself strictly to that business, and remember that the briefer the time you tarry here the better for your health."

Returning stare for stare, gazing straight into the dilated pupils of the gambler, the giant uttered a hoarse laugh, barren of mirth—a vehicle of contempt, simply and purely.

"Kyrect, ole hoss—jes' es yer say, and not es I keer a darn fer it eyther!" he enunciated, insolently. "Bizness fu'st—pleasure a'ter! 'Tain't ther last hour ov ther night, and thar's another sun a'ter to-morrow's!"

Then a short, curt nod, and he turned to the crowd, crying:

"Neow, who bids? Who bids? Hyar's ther dainty critter fer sale, galoots, and ther biggest roll plucks ther prize; jes' es she stan's—ther boss rousbud ov ther Canyon, ther brightest chispa ov ther pocket! Who bids? Who bids?"

In hoarse, chuckling accents at first, with an expression of savage defiance upon his distorted face, then louder and with increasing clearness and vehemence, and in tones betraying just a spice of malignant joy, spoke Red Joaquin.

Silence, breathless, but of brief duration, ensued. Then came the chink-chink of gold coins, hastily poured out upon the hard deal table, and in an eager, excited voice the words:

"Hyar! Cimarron Jack offers \$500!"

The ice was broken. An electric thrill seemed to run through the throng. Bid after bid was made in swift succession, until the first speaker had doubled his offer.

Then a brief lull—a quietude almost unbroken, save by deep-drawn breathing and the restless shuffling of feet.

Unnoticed, a slender, boyish form glided into the place.

The cowering girl shot a covert glance at the brawny, repulsive-looking ruffian, Cimarron Jack. Her eyes encountered his burning gaze, and with a shudder she crouched yet lower upon the table, shivering in every fiber.

Then again the voice of Red Joaquin arose, wild and fierce.

"Who bids? Who bids? Cuss ye fer fools! Dern an' double-dern ye, I say! A mis'abul thousan' fur thet purty critter! Waugh!"

Scarcely had the strains of disgust died away, when High-Card Hank enunciated, coldly and distinctly:

"Fifteen hundred dollars! Let him bid who may, the girl shall be mine!"

A stifled snarl of rage, a look of black, unutterable hatred, and Cimarron Jack strode swiftly out of the House of Gold.

A flush of triumph appeared on the face of the gambler—a look of dismay upon that of the crippled Hercules. High-Card Hank's only formidable rival had withdrawn from the race. The fair prize was as good as won.

"Goin' at fifteen hundred! A cussed shame! Who bids? Ther last chance, so help me! Twitter, chickies—twitter quick, or never!" roared Red Joaquin, madly. "Fifteen hundred an' goin'—goin'!"

"T'other word, an' you're gone!" chipped in a crisp, fresh young voice, in cool, snapping accents. "I say, Cap'n Trackless, at ther best I kin figger it out, you're my meat! so hands up, or by ther blue ethereal! I'll swat ye a few right whar ye live!"

His cavernous mouth agape, his beady black eyes protuberant with sudden astonishment and rage, the giant desperado—for the moment a picture of discomfiture—stared down at the deadly steel tubes leveled at his heart, then on beyond at the smooth and boyish but bitterly determined face of the speaker.

CHAPTER II.

FIGHTING FRANK, THE FEATHERWEIGHT.

ACCUSTOMED to wild and stirring scenes though they were, the *habitués* of the House of Gold stood as if spell-bound—motionless, speechless, for the nonce, seemingly unwilling to credit the evidence of their eyes.

Truly, it was a striking picture!

Confronting the gigantic bully and desperado, a self-cocking "six" in each hand, was a youth of eighteen—a mere stripling, yet one whose open, expressive face, bore the indelible impress of courage and daring bordering close upon the reckless.

A lithe, supple form, clad in an odd yet harmonious admixture of the garb of a prairie cougar and that of a border sport; booted and spurred, with a belt of arms at his middle and a Winchester at his back. Not above five-feet-four in height, but broad of shoulder, full-chested and trim-waisted; shapely as to limbs, with hands and feet that a lady might well have envied; a fine head, from which the hair descended to the shoulders in long, wavy tresses of gold; forehead broad, high and full; eyes of hazel, large and brilliant; nose of purest Grecian mold; mouth large, with clearly-cut red lips and sound white teeth, and a firm, square chin. All in all, a strikingly handsome youth—a boy in years, a man in deeds.

An indescribable expression mantling his bestial visage, Red Joaquin stared down into the boy's flashing hazel eyes a full minute, then, with a characteristic oath, ejaculated:

"Eh, thar, sonny! hain't ye jest a little kee- less with them thar tools? 'Pears es ef—"

"'Pears as if I hold ther drop," cut in the youth, nonchalantly. "Ye've tried buckin' ag'in' Frank ther Featherweight, an' run on a snag—that's all! But ye're ther marked keerd in ther pack jest now, Cap'n Trackless. Wilt!"

High-Card Hank stared. A shade of annoyance crossed his face.

"Fighting Frank Bayne, the Featherweight," he exclaimed, the name slipping involuntarily from him.

And at the same juncture the crouching girl raised her head to stare wildly at the handsome youth, then slipped from the table to a stand on the floor, her pallid but beautiful face bearing a look of relief inexpressible.

"But ov course ye wilt," continued the youth, not heeding either the words of High-Card Hank or the action of the girl. "Just now ye cain't even twinkle yer starry eyes 'thout riskin' a compound fracture."

"Ter quit foolishin' an' git right down ter biz, cap'n, thar's a few questions I want ter ask ye, an' I expect answers so chockful ov solid, gospel truth thet three or four ov'em 'u'd freight a Conestoga. Ketch on?"

"In course, ye know all about the quiet leetle circus thet rascally ole snoozer, Bunco Ben, an' yer Tigers ov ther Trail hed with Carleton Osman's outfit back in ther Big Gap. Ye know, too, thet yer gang succeeded in gettin' off with ther gal, Miss Aurelia."

"Wot I want ter know is, fu'st ov all, who put up ther job ov holdin' up ther outfit? You didn't do it on your own hook—the light warn't wuth ther candle."

"Thet's question Number 1. Now, assert yerself, cap'n, an' see thet ye ante a hunk ov solid truth."

The giant desperado stood stock-still, his mouth agape, his beady black eyes opened to their widest extent. His expression was that of one hopelessly nonplused.

"See hyar, sonny, s'pose ye guv me suthin' easy," he growled, his deep tones full of disgust. "Dern an' double-dern me, ef I know wot ye're drivin' at."

"Fu'st, I'm cused ov bein' thet cantankerous critter, Cap'n Trackless; an' then, atop ov thet, I'm 'cused ov doing up ther outfit ov a pilgrim I never heerd tell on! No, sir-ee, hossfly! I cain't answer yer question—an' I w'u'dn't ef I c'u'd. Jest—"

"Stop, thar!" broke in the Featherweight, almost savagely. "'Tain't no use ter lie! Ye've hed a chance ter clear yer record. Now—"

The irascible strain ceased abruptly; a murmur of surprise or wonder went up from the throng.

Fighting Frank, crouching slightly, had, with

scarcely a perceptible effort thrown a somerset, planking his heels fully and squarely against the forehead of Red Joaquin, hurling the brawny ruffian to the floor in a senseless heap.

So entirely unexpected, so dexterously executed was the feat, that not a man in the room could have lifted even so much as a finger in time to have prevented it.

Alighting with the suppleness of a panther, the young athlete, making a single bound, reached the side of the girl. Another instant, and he had whirled, rather than carried, her from the table to the wall, and stood before her, facing High-Card Hank and his fellow canyonites, his hazel eyes aglow, his lips parted in a careless smile, his revolvers on a dead level, with the hammers trembling upon a poise under the steady pressure of his long, tapering fingers against the triggers.

"Try conclusions, shall we, gents?" he queried lightly, yet with a certain metallic sort of ring in the smooth easy tones. "As fer thet"—with a swift inclination of his head toward the senseless giant—"ther less said either way, p'rhaps ther better. On'y this from me: He is Cap'n Trackless, ther noted road-agent."

"But, ef eny ov ye feel onhappy over it, ther ball hes bin started. Will ye keep it rollin'? Down grade—no trouble ter make it hump itself!"

Just in time, that masterly retreat to the wall; and the cool, devil-may-care words of the Featherweight, backed with the easy handling of his tools, was exactly the thing needed just then. Otherwise, his career would have ended right there, and with it all hope and brightness have been blotted from the future of Aurelia Osman.

For, from the throng beyond High-Card Hank, more than one pair of ugly, bloodshot eyes had glared with wolfish fury at the dashing, reckless youth—more than one deadly "six" been drawn to end his existence. But, it is one thing to shoot a man in the back, another to court death in the muzzles of weapons up and ready.

No mining-camp in all the West is free of its quota of bad men; and Chispa Canyon's denizens were little better than the offscourings of the older camps. While there were men good and true among them, yet for the sake of peace they shielded the light of their virtues with the cloak of secrecy.

The crisply-uttered words of the Featherweight, pregnant with defiance, but wholly devoid of even so much as a trace of bluster or braggadocio, had scarcely ceased, when High-Card Hank shifted uneasily, then laughed—a soft, pleasant sound, yet as deadly at that juncture as an adder's hiss. There were those in the House of Gold to whom it expressed, as plainly as if uttered in so many words: "Kill the whelp; but let the deed be secret."

"If we must snite each other, let it be fair and open, is all I ask," continued the Featherweight, as if divining the gambler's very thoughts. Then, reflectively: "Tho' jest why thar sh'u'd be a ruction I cain't see."

"Nor I; for if you've aught against that bruised and battered mass of flesh, Red Joaquin, you are the friend of every honest man in the camp," swiftly avowed High-Card Hank, moving forward a trifle, an unctuous smile upon his usually cold, impassive countenance. "And if he is really Captain Trackless, the mountain bandit, as you have charged, I am equally sure that he has 'held up' his last victim; for wild as is Chispa Canyon, the common law of the Territory has faithful representatives in our constabulary—not to mention good Judge Lynch."

Fighting Frank lowered his revolvers, but warily held one in readiness for a snap-shot from the hip. He knew full well the unsavory reputation of the Canyonites—that fair words might cloak dark purposes. Crafty as the sport of the House of Gold might be, the young plainsman was his match in subtlety.

"Ther young lady kin doubtless prove ther truth ov w'at I've said," the latter remarked, carelessly, yet with his piercing hazel eyes looking straight into the treacherous orbs of the gambler.

"That I can," promptly affirmed the girl, over the shoulder of her fearless young protector. "The big fellow on the floor is assuredly the leader of the band who attacked my father's outfit this morning, although he was not with them at the time."

High-Card Hank bowed effusively, and said: "Your lightest word, lady, would be amply sufficient to convict the scoundrel of any crime, in our eyes, even though he had been our warmest friend."

"But you speak of your father's outfit having been attacked—"

"Permit me ter explain," the Featherweight brusquely interpolated.

"Week ago I was hired ter guide ther outfit ov Mr. Carleton Osman from Golden City ter ther camp ov Nowhar. Ther party was made up ov Osman, his darter hyar, myself an' a darky knowl as Belzy Golightly. We reached ther Big Gap down ther trail last night, an' decided ter make camp thar. Jest afore daylight we war attacked, ther annimiles stampeded an' Miss Aurelia hyar stolen. all in ther twinklin' ov an eye.

"Golightly war standin' guard at ther time, fer we knowed we war cluss upon ther stampin' ground ov Cap'n Trackless an' his Tigers ov ther Trail; but ther bedizzened hellyons war too much for ther coon, an' they smote us hard, the' I *did* skotch Bunco Ben, ther gang's lieutenant—skotched 'im bad; but he got off.

"W'en we kem ter figger out ther damage a'ter ther scrimmage, we found ther Miss Osman hed bin captured, ther nigger an' ther rest ov ther stock stampeded. But as soon as day broke Osman an' myself lifted ther trail ov ther varlets an' held it so cluss that we holel 'em jest afore sunset. An' w'ile I hustled down inter camp a'ter help, he's bin keepin' his eye on ther Tigers' lay-out.

"Ye kin imagine my s'prise at findin' Miss Osman hyar; we war dead sart'in she'd bin carried ter Cap'n Trackless's lair."

"And so I was," declared the girl quickly. "When we reached the camp up in the hills, about an hour before sunset, Bunco Ben was given a note by the sentry in charge of the place. The result was that with two picked men he left camp, after having given orders that I was to be taken at once to Captain Trackless."

"And that order was obeyed?" queried High-Card Hank.

"It was."

"And so you are sure that this senseless clod is none other than the redoubtable Trackless?"

"Quite sure; he is the person to whom I was taken by the agent of Bunco Ben."

"Was the captain at the camp?" further inquired the sport.

"No—yes! I hardly know," and the girl paused, a puzzled expression stealing over her face. "I was blindfolded, and, while we walked a considerable distance, it seemed to me that we had been going in a circle. When the bandage was taken from my eyes, we were in a large cavern, and before us was a man whose face was concealed by a mask. The place was so dark that I could just distinguish his outlines.

"When the agent of Bunco Ben had departed, the masked outlaw attempted to question me concerning my past life, and other things. Naturally, I refused to reply to his questions, and after a few minutes my eyes were again bandaged and we left the cavern.

"After a walk of two hours or more, the outlaw announced that we had reached the outskirts of Chispa Canyon, and, after cautioning me to keep a still tongue, uncovered my eyes and removed his mask."

"Then, to my mind, it is settled beyond a peradventure that the fellow is really and truly the notorious mountain bandit," declared High-Card Hank, without a moment's hesitation, when Aurelia Osman had ended.

"And now, my dear young lady, permit me to conduct you to quarters more befitting one of your sex than is this rude place."

Her face flushing slightly, Aurelia Osman coyly placed her hand upon the arm of the Featherweight, and responded:

"Put yourself to no inconvenience on my account. This gentleman—Mr. Bayne—will act as my escort."

Acquiescing, with his accustomed grace and ease, to this decision of the girl, but mentally cursing the dangerously handsome young guide, the gambler went on to say:

"Before you go, Miss Osman, I trust you will permit me to offer an explanation of certain things that have happened here in the past hour, for I do not wish to have you regard me as an utter barbarian. In the absence of Marshal Buckshot from the camp, it was an impossibility to check the high-handed proceedings of Red Joaquin, or Captain Trackless, save by force of arms—and then he would have slain you rather than have yielded you up. Knowing this I was from the first determined to buy—or, better, ransom—you from his villain—"

A sudden uproar abruptly checked the utterance of further words.

Several of the more curious of the roughs and

toughs assembled in the gambling-hell had gathered around the prostrate form of Red Joaquin. At the point where the hiatus occurred in the speech of High-Card Hank, the giant outlaw had suddenly and without an instant's warning sprung to his feet, gripping in each hand a leveled weapon, and sending back pell-mell the astounded throng.

But, strangest and most startling of all, the long, matted beard and the shock of red hair had fallen from his face and head, revealing the strange, homely and deeply-bronzed features of a man of five-and-fifty years!

A moment, the sport of the House of Gold stood like one electrified.

"One thousand dollars for him, dead or alive!" he shouted, suddenly springing forward.

"Kill him!"

"Rah fur Jedge Lynch!"

"Hang ther dorg!"

And a full score other such shouts went up, filling the gambling-hell with wildest confusion.

"Stand back! don't crowd me, ye hounds! One at a time, an' I'll take a regiment of sech as ye!" enunciated the imperiled giant, in slow, steady accents, his black eyes flashing, the muzzles of his revolvers shifting so that they covered each and all of the clamorers for his blood.

Meanwhile, Fighting Frank had remained like one dazed, staring hard at the partially metamorphosed giant; but as the latter ceased speaking, the youth clutched the arm of his fair companion, and in a voice low and hoarse exclaimed:

"By ther Lord ov Israel! I know that voice—I know that face! It is—it is— By heavens! it is Old Buckeye—an' a whiter man never drew a bead!"

And, as if for the time totally oblivious of all else than the danger menacing the giant, the Featherweight sprang forward, drawing his weapons and shouting:

"Back—back! all ov ye! This man is not Captain Trackless!"

"Right, gamecock; and, because he is not Captain Trackless, he must die!" came in deep, powerful tones from the doorway, as, across the threshold, strode a masked man of herculean build, carrying in each hand a cocked "six," up and ready.

"Know ye, that I am Captain Trackless, the Terror of the Trail, and with my Tigers I am here for blood!"

True enough; following like shadows in his footprints came a full half-score men, each and all masked and heavily armed!

Upon this sudden and wholly unexpected appearance of the notorious freebooter and his followers, there was scarcely a man in the House of Gold but felt a thrill akin to terror.

The Tigers of the Trail, as the outlaw clan had come to be known in the brief time they had made their headquarters in the camp's vicinity, were noted as the most to be dreaded of mountain banditti.

There were those among the denizens of Chispa Canyon who had often predicted a descent just such as the present one; and, now that it had come, the wilder and more reckless characters of the camp, who had scoffed at the idea as absurd, stood to all appearances dazed and stupefied in the face of their peril.

High-Card Hank alone of the Canyonites witnessed the advent of the robber band with unwavering composure. His white face wore an icy smile—a smile that boded a coming storm.

Scarcely had the Giant Freebooter and his men halted in a half-circle just within the door, covering with their weapons all within the House of Gold, when the nervy little gambler, advancing a trifle, nodded shortly, and in tones of utter contempt demanded:

"What is it you fellows want?"

Captain Trackless laughed—an odd, unpleasant sound, dry and harsh.

"Don't know what it is we don't want," he replied. "But just now there are three things which we want worse than we do all things else."

"Well, go on."

"First, this girl here."

"Ah! Go on."

"Then this cursed man-hunter who has been masquerading as Captain Trackless, Old Buckeye—or the Sierra Sleuth, as he is better known. I want him, above all."

The deep tones of the freebooter chief fairly rankled with ferocity, and his dark orbs blazed fitfully through the eyelets of his mask as he bent upon Red Joaquin a steadfast stare.

The gambler started. For a fleeting instant

his expression was that of one confronted by an apparition.

"A detective—the Sierra Sleuth! Pshaw! Go on!"

The last two words were in a hard, strained, unnatural voice. The others were barely audible. Under circumstances a trifle less trying, it would have been apparent to all that the sport of the House of Gold had become strangely ill at ease at the mention of the presence of a detective by Captain Trackless.

"Last of all, every ounce of yellow dust that can be raked up in Chispa Canyon," concluded the giant robber.

"And is that all?" in a far-fetched attempt at jocularity.

"That is all," grimly.

"And what if we resist?"

"We'll turn the camp into a boneyard."

Again High-Card Hank started sharply, the evil smile dying on his white face, and stared straight ahead, his cat-like eyes fixed on the doorway beyond the Tigers of the Trail.

And, what was yet more remarkable, Fighting Frank, Aurelia Osman and Old Buckeye, at the same instant peered hard in the direction of the door, each and all betraying signs of uneasiness.

"Merciful heavens! we are lost!"

The words burst from the lips of Aurelia Osman with a harsh, gasping sound, ending in a wild shriek. Her face as colorless as ashes, her magnificent black eyes filled with a light akin to terror, she reeled blindly, then flung her hands aloft and fell to the floor in a dead faint.

Ere her startling words were fully uttered High-Card Hank, whose eyes had not wavered in their fixed stare, flung his revolvers to a dead level and fired once—twice—thrice, with lightning-like swiftness.

A sardonic laugh was the answer; then came the words:

"Don't waste your powder, dear brother; you will need it for foes far worse than I!"

"But what means this strange scene? Can it be that the fabled Greeks have met and the tug of war is on, or— Furies! it is my old friend, that paragon of virtue, Captain Trackless!"

"Now, lay on Macduff!"

There could be no mistaking that cold, clear voice. The speaker was Major Cool, the lone rider of the trail. He stood just within the shades of the House of Gold, a self-cocking revolver in each jeweled hand, a half-smile upon his mustached lips, a strange light scintillating in his big blue eyes.

With the last word, one of his weapons cracked. Ere the report had died away, it was swallowed up in the dull, heavy roar of a volley.

The lights of the gambling-hell flickered, then expired, leaving the place as black as Erebus and filled with the grim horrors of a bloody hand-to-hand conflict.

CHAPTER III.

THE GIANT SPY OF PILGRIM'S PATH.

LITTLE more than a mere pocket in the giant hills was the site of Chispa Canyon, the camp being perched on a V-shaped bench, or terrace, near the base of a towering crag, at the intersection of two converging canyons, known to the gold-seekers as the "Pilgrim's Path" and the "Devil's Lane," respectively.

Down each of these gorges rushed a narrow stream to a confluence immediately below the camp, whence rolled a small river to the southward through the rock-walled pass formed by the union of the canyons.

Up this pass, wound a narrow, tortuous trail, crossing over a bridge of timber the Pilgrim's Path, entering Chispa Canyon and ending at the doorway of a large rambling frame structure, the sign-board of which announced:

"PEG-LEG PETE'S LAY-OUT!"

"BAR AND BOARD."

"Drop in. Bet Y'ur Shirt Unkle Peg Wul Treat Yur Rite!"

Adjoining Peg-Leg Pete's Lay-out on the north was the long, flat-roofed building occupied by the saloon and gambling-hell known as the House of Gold, while facing the latter and not more than a dozen paces distant a rival concern had been thrown up, with the announcement that it would be called the Gold Bug, and would be open for business as soon as the proprietor had arrived.

Beyond these three institutions, on the gradually widening terrace were a considerable number of tents and slab shanties, while in the shadow of the rising rocks at the northern boundary of the camp were several wicky-ups. Saloons, dance-halls and gambling-hells

abounded, and, as has been intimated in the foregoing chapters, the denizens of the camp, considered collectively, were a "hard crowd."

At an early hour of the day preceding the night on which Major Cool made his appearance in Chispa Canyon, High-Card Hank might have been seen in the doorway of the House of Gold, roughly garbed and armed with a Winchester, revolvers and bowie-knife, as if intent on a scramble for game among the wooded fastnesses of the surrounding crags.

After a quiet but thoroughly searching survey of his surroundings, he sallied forth, crossing the bridge over the turbulent, rushing waters and laying his course to the northwest along the eastern side of the Pilgrim's Path.

A thousand yards from the camp, at an abrupt bend in his winding pathway, the crafty sport ensconced himself snugly behind a bowlder, whence, for full twenty minutes, he scanned with cat-like patience all that was visible of the distance he had just traversed.

No sign of life—no trace of a shadow on his trail could he discover, and with a grim smile he resumed his way.

Another thousand yards, and again he halted, going through precisely the same maneuvers with like fruitless results.

"Oh, it's a thousand to one that this haunting fear of mine is groundless," he assured himself, as he turned into a narrow ravine running at right angles to the great gorge. "We have been too cautious for even the most patient and cunning detective spy, and I haven't the remotest doubt that our plot will be a golden success!"

Yet subtle as was the sport of the House of Gold, he was at that moment overmatched by the superior artfulness of the unseen enemy at whom he had just hinted.

Far up on the opposite side of the Pilgrim's Path a spur, or arm, of barren rock—in shape not unlike a huge dormer-window, save that its top was flat—projected from the face of the acclivity, directly opposite to the mouth of the ravine into which the gambler had turned.

At the outer edge of the table-like top of this elevated projection, lying face downward, was a man—a gigantic fellow—provided with a powerful pocket telescope, through which he was noting each move of High-Card Hank.

Emboldened by a feeling of perfect security, the gambler pushed rapidly up the ravine for a distance of three or four hundred yards, when his further progress was checked by a wall of solid rock.

Then forth from a niche in the walls of the natural *cul-de-sac* stepped a man—an exact counterpart of the giant spy of Pilgrim's Path; a man of Herculean build and evil visage—in brief, the mountain tramp and vagabond, Red Joaquin!

But, strongly enough, the distortion of neck and shoulders, which so horribly marred the symmetry of his appearance when he appeared in Chispa Canyon, was not now apparent.

"Hello! hello! it is you, captain!" ejaculated High-Card Hank, repressing a nervous start at the sudden appearance of the red-headed Hercules.

"Oh! yes," sneered the latter. "I've been in waiting a half-hour. Hope I haven't hurried you!"

"Not at all," coolly retorted the gambler, as he sought a seat commanding a view of the length of the ravine. "But, I say, captain—what is that flashing in the sun's rays, up yonder, on the side of Pilgrim's Path?"

Red Joaquin stared upward a moment, then uttered an oath.

"Oh! a Gatling gun—the sabers of a cavalry company, or something of the sort, I reckon," he replied, with a gesture of impatience. Then, abruptly:

"A runner from Bunco Ben reached camp at daybreak."

The gambler started to his feet.

"Then—"

"We have met the enemy, and they are ours," to use a familiar quotation," continued Red Joaquin, watching his unscrupulous *confrere* much as a cat watches a mouse. "Bunco Ben and a picked party of seven have for three days been lying in wait at the Big Gap for Carleton Osman's outfit. At daybreak the blow fell."

"They secured the girl?"

"Yes—that is, it is reasonable to suppose they did. As soon as the outfit made camp at the Gap, Ben sent back Monte Jack, saying the attack would be made an hour before day."

"Why the delay?"

An ugly smile crossed the face of the giant.

"Bunco Ben is a gentleman with a long head,"

he affirmed, by way of reply. "It seems that he recognized in Osman's guide one Fighting Frank, a young plainsman known from the Rio Grande to the Red River of the North as a bad citizen to monkey with. Naturally, Ben arranged the attack to catch the young gentleman napping, if possible."

Resuming his seat, High-Card Hank beat an impatient tattoo on the rock with his fingers.

"I don't feel easy in the matter, at all," he declared. "How many were in the Osman party?"

"Four—the girl and three men."

"Oh! that is better. Your Tigers would hardly have failed."

"They did not fail—they never do," quietly affirmed the giant.

"You will bring the girl into camp to-night?"

Red Joaquin uttered a mocking laugh.

"Oh! yes, certainly—after the stipulations of our compact have been fully complied with," he said. "I suppose you came with your pockets lined?"

"I can assure you I did nothing of the kind," responded the gambler, a provoking smile just showing on his white face. "I can't think of honor in connection with thieves. Deliver the goods and the dust is yours."

A dark scowl betrayed the ill-humor of the giant.

"Fetch the girl into Chispa Canyon and there turn her over to you! See here, Paul Parkerton, do you consider me a fool—a blooming idiot? I'll admit they're a bad lot down in the Canyon, but don't you get it into your head that they'd submit to that a moment! No—"

"Don't make an ass of yourself, Red," interrupted the gambler in silken tones, a greenish glint in his treacherous, cat-like orbs, as he lifted his long forefinger warningly; "and don't you mention any names. Just bring the girl to the House of Gold to-night, and offer her to the highest bidder. No one yet dreams that Red Joaquin and Captain Trackless are one and the same, and after to-night the dual character is useless. By this means *you* will get your coin—I shall pull the wool over many a pair sharp eyes."

"You mean to—"

"I mean to buy the girl her liberty!"

"Oho! oho!" uttered the giant musingly. "My skull is thicker than yours, but I see your game now. Be it as you say; but remember—a sign of treachery, and your life shall pay the forfeit."

"Look to yourself," coolly retorted the gambler, with a scornful wave of his hand. "And while you are at it, don't forget the good health of Major Cool."

A curt nod from Red Joaquin, and then the two men separated, the gambler retracing his steps down the ravine, while the giant disappeared within the niche from which he had stepped to meet his ally.

A crafty smile lit up the face of High-Card Hank. Preoccupied with his villainous plots, into his subtle brain there crept no second thought of the suspicious flash he had noted on the opposite slope of the Pilgrim's Path—the gleam of the sun's rays upon the telescope of the giant spy.

Meanwhile, Red Joaquin, or Captain Trackless, his red-bearded face convulsed with rage now that he was free from observation, peered forth from the niche at his retreating *confrere*, and uttered a savage anathema.

"Curse you, Paul Parkerton," he enunciated in low, deep tones, shaking his clinched hand at the receding gambler. "Curse you! you are playing your hand well in this game for beauty and ducats, but you are playing to lose."

"Go on—capture the fancy of this unsuspecting girl, marry her—and find yourself foiled!"

"Oho! you are deep, and you are crafty, and you are handsome, but in this royal game in which hearts are to be the trumps and the stakes countless thousands, you have met your match and your ruin in a hunted wretch whom you would use as cat's-paw to rake your golden acorns from the fire!"

"Go on! go on, Paul Parkerton, with your plotting and your scheming, but the hoarded wealth of Ezra, the Miser, is not for you nor the bride you seek! Ah, no! ah, no! It is for one fairer, who with it shall be *mine*!"

A hoarse, chuckling, laugh, indescribably chilling, followed the impetuous and at times almost incoherent words, and with a strange glow in the depths of his usually slumbrous black eyes the giant desperado glared around like a madman.

Then, abruptly stooping, he grasped the edge of a large flat stone, which he drew aside, re-

vealing a dark cavernous opening. A strong ladder led into the gloomy depths below, and, securing a foothold on its rungs, the giant outlaw lowered the stone carefully into place.

A narrow, rock-walled passage sloped downward some fifty feet from the foot of the ladder, then turned at right angles and led out into a large, dry cavern. Here the giant outlaw halted, his brows knit in thought.

A gloomy place, at first glance, yet one which had been rendered passably comfortable, in a rude way, as a habitation, was this cavern. At one side was a couch of skins, while twenty feet beyond, on a terrace just outside the cave, a burly negro was busily engaged over a camp-fire, filling the place with the appetizing odors of coffee and broiling steaks.

This terrace overlooked a picturesque, circular basin, some five or six acres in extent, and dotted with a half-dozen dingy tents. A considerable number of horses roamed here and there, cropping the scant grass. About the tents lounged a dozen men.

On every hand arose towering walls with here and there a clump of undergrowth to break their bleakness. There was no visible outlet to the basin. It was a natural pocket.

The cavern and the basin were the respective headquarters of Captain Trackless and his Tigers of the Trail.

For full five minutes the outlaw chief stared down at the pebbly floor in moody silence, his face set and stern, his great hands tightly clinched. Then he strode across the cavern to a dark recess, whence he appeared a moment later, clothed in a neat suit of buckskin, but with his red beard missing and the upper half of his face concealed by a dark mask.

"Lark! A pint of coffee, black and strong and hot," and the giant sunk wearily upon the edge of the couch.

The black cook quickly obeyed the peremptory order and brought the steaming coffee.

After swallowing the beverage, the captain hastily scrawled a message on a page torn from a memorandum-book, which he handed to the negro, saying:

"Take this to Ugly Upton. Tell him it is to be given to Bunco Ben as soon as he arrives in camp. And, mind you, Lark, I am not to be disturbed under any ordinary circumstances until the boys get in from the Big Gap racket. Do you understand?"

The black nodded, and, with the message, left the cavern, dropping, as he passed out, a heavy curtain across the opening on the terrace.

Alone, Captain Trackless threw himself on the pile of skins. His appearance was that of a man greatly exhausted, and within five minutes he had sunk into a deep sleep.

For hours he lay almost as one dead, then awoke with a start, quivering in every fiber, his deep-set eyes fixed with a light akin to horror, while a cold sweat exuded in great drops from his forehead.

"Only a dream—but the third time!" he muttered, in a hoarse voice, as he struggled to his feet and glared into the shadows of the surrounding recesses, his broad palms nestling close upon the butts of his belted weapons. "And he came, as before, trailing me step by step as the sleuth-bound trails his prey."

Utterly unnerved, he struck a match and lighted a rude lamp, the garish light from which, while serving partially to dispel the gloom of the cavern, only deepened the darkness of the many branching passages.

Then striding to the curtained outlet, he slightly pushed aside the hanging folds and peered forth.

"Night is near at hand," he observed, speaking aloud. "Bunco Ben should be here with the girl at any moment now. After that, one bold stroke, and the way to the ducats of Ezra, the Miser, is clear; for I shall take this girl to the House of Gold, and there, as Red Joaquin, offer her for sale to the highest bidder. Paul Parkerton will fall into my well-laid trap, to forever after curse his blind folly. Now to don my disguise, for the hour is drawing near."

Dropping the curtain into place, the outlaw chief turned and strode back into the cavern, where he secured the lamp and retreated to the recess in which he had divested himself of beard and wig.

When he reappeared, it was not as Captain Trackless. The terribly twisted shoulders and neck, the inflamed face and mottled red beard, were those of Red Joaquin.

Replacing the lamp on the narrow stone ledge or shelf, the giant desperado was startled by a significant cough directly behind him.

Swiftly he wheeled, his hands upon his revolvers.

Facing him, a devilish smile on his bronzed face, his black eyes glowing with a wicked light, was no less a personage than the giant spy of Pilgrim's Path!

In each hand was a revolver, the hammers oscillating threateningly, the muzzles bearing directly upon the heart of the entrapped road-agent!

The Herculean spy was the first to break the oppressive silence. His tones were low, yet so cold and penetrating that his auditor shivered.

"Don't stir, cap'n—I'd hate ter waste a ca't-ridge," he said, his eyes fairly chilling Captain Trackless, so full of deadly menace was their hateful stare.

"That dream—the Sierra Sleuth!" the latter gasped, involuntarily shrinking back.

"Ye know what brings me hyar?"

The road-agent essayed to speak, but his tongue failed him. He simply shook his head in the negative.

The denial added fuel to the flame of the giant spy's wrath. His glowing black eyes kindled with a sudden blaze of rage.

"Ye don't know eh?" he grated, forcing the words with an effort. "Ye've forgotten ther past, I s'pose—thet ye ever war Ezra Grimshaw!"

"Forget nothing!" doggedly protested Captain Trackless, a sudden drooping of his eyelids concealing a crafty glitter deep in his piercing orbs. "I remember only too well Eylan Buck! A thousand times have I cursed the day I lifted my hand against—"

"No more ov thet—yer soul aire black enuff 'thout sech useless lies es thet!" sharply interrupted the spy, moving forward a trifle. "A thief may repent at the eleventh hour—*you*, never! Ye hain't built thet way, Ezra Grimshaw. Yer father's blood aire in yer veins!"

Despite himself, the road-agent shuddered. The voice of the man before him bespoke pitiless hatred.

"But a truce to ther past—let us deal with ther present," continued the giant spy, the strains of his voice changing not a particle. "Ye know thet I hed sworn ther oath, Ezra Grimshaw—es *they* died so shall ther light ov yer mis'abel life go out. But, not now—not hyar; ye aire in disguise; ye mean mischief ter one who has never harmed ye—a young gal, who by law has fallen heir ter thet which ye vainly reddened yer hands with blood ter secure—ther fortune ov Ezra, ther Miser."

"Fer years ther authorities hev s'arched for her, high an' low, an' all thet time ye hev kept trace ov her, knowin' thet Carleton Osman, or properly Peter Dauthett, dare not present his darter as the heiress, lest he suffer fur ther crime *you* committed, waitin' fur ther time ter come when she c'u'd claim her own—claim it, an es yer wife!"

"But thet day will never come, ye red-handed destroyer—*never*. W'ile ye hev bin trackin' down this helpless gal, I've bin keepin' tab on *you*. No move of yours or ov Paul Parkerton, yer old-time ally, hes bin too deep fer me. I know jest how ther game stands—how many p'int's ye've scored, an' how many tricks ye must take ter win."

"An' from this hour until ther end ov ther game ther real Cap'n Trackless will be seen no more. *I, Old Buckeye, shall take his place and play his hand!*"

Ere the giant spy had ceased speaking, with a mighty bound he covered the space between himself and the road-agent chief. The next instant the latter lay unconscious on the cavern floor, stricken down with a blow that would have felled an ox.

CHAPTER IV.

GREEK MEETS GREEK.

THE House of Gold bid fair to become a house of death.

For a full minute following the volley which so effectually extinguished the lights of the place, naught could be heard but curses and groans, and the mad hurrying and skurrying of booted feet across the rough floor.

Then a shrill, penetrating whistle rung out, clear and distinct above the uproar; there was a wild, irresistible rush for the door, and the cries within were superseded by a series of triumphant yells from the streets of the camp.

"Steady, pards—easy now! Don't waste your powder!" cautioned High-Card Hank, in tones distinctly audible and recognizable throughout the long room. "The road-agents have gone—let us count the cost!"

Even as he spoke, the iron-nerved little gambler, springing upon a faro table, struck a match, and lighted a lamp.

His "heelers," taking their cue from his words,

had busied themselves in a like manner, and, as a result, within two minutes after the cessation of the firing, the House of Gold was sufficiently well lighted to enable the surviving participants in the affray to note the results of the unexpected descent of Captain Trackless and his men.

High-Card Hank, unscathed by lead or steel, hastily surveyed his surroundings, then with a vindictive oath, dropped lightly from the table.

Not without cost had been that fearful struggle, brief as was its duration. Three men—Canyonites, one and all—lay lifeless, while the floor ran red with the blood of the wounded.

And that the road-agents had accomplished the full measure of their nefarious work was plainly evident.

Old Buckeye and Aurelia Osman had disappeared—spirited away, in all likelihood, by the ruthless outlaws; nor was the young guide, Fighting Frank, anywhere to be seen.

Then, too, the money-drawers of the faro-tables, and of the bar, at one side of the room, had been broken open and rifled of every dollar.

"Curse the long-legged pirate!" savagely gritted the gambler, as he noted in detail the destruction wrought. "Such a go-down as this, if often repeated, would break the biggest bank in existence."

"A hard knock, hoss-fly! a hard knock! Had you taken a friendly one, however, instead of throwing your end around at random, we might 'a' floored thet gangling tough. Who knows? But don't fret a-teething. Next—"

An oath, a snarl of rage, broke in on the taunting, malicious strains, and the sport of the House of Gold dashed forward, his hands seeking the weapons in his belt, his cat-like eyes distorted and ablaze with murderous fury.

"Now, don't—*don't*, I pray you! You forget yourself—one short acquaintance won't permit such familiarity!"

Then—only a laugh, but infinitely more maddening, then a blow; and High-Card Hank reeled back, the picture of commingled rage and chagrin!

For facing him, and not more than three feet distant, his elbows resting carelessly upon the end of the bar, gripping in each hand a weapon—the identical tools used with such deadly effect beside the river a short while before—stood Major Cool, a half-earnest, half-jesting expression on his face, a laughing light in his blue eyes, a smile of blended contempt and amusement parting his thin red lips.

"And this is the way you welcome a stranger in camp?" he continued, not only scanning the livid face of the sport, but covertly watching each move of the restless Canyonite beyond.

"Pon my soul! it's a playful way, but not calculated to tech the festive tenderfoot in his vital spot—his pocket; but, for a professional brother—Reminds me, that does, that in view of the present troubled condition of your affairs I have been inexcusably careless in not introducing myself!"

"Major G. Washington Cool, I am, of the new shebang—the Gold Bug. A thousand apologies, dear boy, for having unwittingly rifled your eider down!"

"Gentlemen, I believe nominations come next in the order of business. John Barleycorn the choice, by acclamation? Barkeep, the thirsty are with you. Will you do me the honor?"

This last, with right hand extended, to High-Card Hank.

Lightly uttered throughout, but tinged with just a suspicion of pasquinade, had been his words; and, as the throng pushed toward the bar, Major Cool with a swift movement had returned his revolvers to his belt, then carelessly thrust his left hand into the side pocket of his loose velvet jacket ere proffering the right to his fellow gambler.

An instant; the sport of the House of Gold, a wolfish smile parting his lips, stared at him as if doubting his sanity; then, a crafty glitter in his cat-like orbs, his left hand resting snugly upon a revolver in his belt, he extended his right hand to meet that of the major, and stepped forward—only to stumble awkwardly over an overturned stool!

Simultaneously there came a sharp report, a bitter, snarling curse from High-Card Hank, a sardonic laugh from Major Cool!

Then a panther-like leap, and the latter had his back to the wall, his revolvers up and covering the startled crowd.

"Once for all—is it peace, or war?" he demanded, his voice cold and ringing. "If it is my blood you want, don't beat the devil around the stump, but say the word. *You*, High-Card

Hank—you it is I am talking to—after you, the others!"

The little gambler, having recovered his equilibrium, stood staring down at the revolver clutched in his left hand, apparently oblivious to all else, an expression bordering consternation plainly noticeable on his pallid face.

At the words of the stranger sport, he started as if stung, thrust the weapon into his belt, and, with a swift, covert glance at the faces of the Canyonites at the bar, turned slowly to meet the bold challenge—to meet it with an urbane smile!

"War? No, I thank you, major; it will be peace first, last and all the time, if you please!" he replied, extending his hand as coolly as if nothing had occurred to mar the serenity of the occasion. "We are strangers—why should we be foes?"

An odd smile crossed the face of Major Cool.

"True—why *should* we?" he returned, again putting away his weapons. "That awkward misstep of yours, resulting in the pulling of a 'six,' smacked of a hostile move, and hence my shot, aimed to cripple the action of your revolver. But—accidents will occur, you know."

Then the hands of the two men met, not with the hearty grasp of friends, but barely touching, as if each knew he was crossing palms with a deadly, secret foe.

"A deuced fine shot it was, too, though my hand got the benefit of a dozen spotters from your bullet," observed High-Card Hank, with a rueful look, as he held up to view the injured member. "Only barked a little, you see; but the first sensation was far from pleasant."

"However, major, no blame can attach to you in the matter—it was my own cursed awkwardness; I was rattled by the unexpected appearance of Captain Trackless and his Tigers, and, with all my boasted coolness, was fool enough to completely lose my head."

"Then, too, at first glance, you bore such a striking resemblance to an old enemy of mine that I was morally sure it was shoot or be shot; but with the light full on your face, I can see that you are not he, and—Well, suppose we drown the whole miserable affair?"

"With all my heart," readily acquiesced the stranger sport, with an airy nod.

And arm-in-arm the two men walked over to the bar, High-Card Hank mentally vowing the reckless adventurer should not live to witness the rising of another sun, Major Cool covertly alert for a sign of treachery—both outwardly smiling and wholly at ease.

And that it was diamond cut diamond, was shown in a startling manner ere the night's dark pall lifted before the sun of the coming day.

"Hello! hello! Is the Old Scratch to pay—or has the gentleman vulgarly known as Jim Jams captured the outfit? 'Pon me soul! it must be one or the other—perhaps both!"

Major Cool again. He stood just within the door of Peg-Leg Pete's Lay-out, a cynical smile on his handsome face, his eyes sparkling suspiciously.

The rapidly filling bar-room was in a turmoil of excitement, and "Uncle Peg," as mine host of the hostelry was popularly known, was the central figure of the hubbub.

In his accustomed place behind the bar, his usually rubicund visage all aglow, his gray eyes snapping furiously, he stood, for once since his appearance in the Canyon roused from apathy bordering stupidity.

On a narrow shelf immediately behind him lay a Winchester rifle, while the broad girdle about his Falstaffian middle fairly bristled with side-arms.

And to this latter fact could be attributed no little of the prevailing confusion; for it was a decided innovation, in that never before had the jovial boniface appeared in public in better array.

Then, too, it smacked of the ridiculous, as it was current report that Peg-Leg Pete wasn't much of a marksman—the poorest in the camp, in fact, so far as was known. But, in pinning their faith to mere hearsay, the Canyonites, the sequel showed, were "going it blind."

"Yer needn't laugh, pards; et aire gospel I aire slingin' ye—thet's wot!" he vociferated, as Major Cool pushed through the rough throng and secured a position near the end of the bar. "Ye kin snicker at these hyar tools an' be derved ter ye; but I'm goin' ter use 'em—see ef I don't!"

"*You!* Ye c'u'dn't hit ther side ov a barn—less ye war shet up inside!" came a voice from the crowd, whereat there was a general laugh. "But, hones'ly, Pete—w'at on airth hes

bruck loose, anyhow? They tell me es how Cap'n Trackless didn't fergit yer place ter-night. Ef—"

"Thet's w'at! 'Nuff sed, Sol! Ther berdered bellyun tried ter kidnap my darter!" and Pete Grattan's podgy fist descended with thunderous force upon the bar, causing bottles and glasses to dance and jingle to the verge of demolition.

"Kidnap yer gal!"

The exclamation burst simultaneously from a half-score throats, and as many bronzed hands involuntarily sought revolver butts.

"Thet's w'at! Fill up, everybody, an' I'll orate ther sarcumstances. Eh, stranger—cigar? Say, Gold-Bug sport, hain't ye? Good 'nuff; shake—I a' hearn ov ye ter-night. Reckon ye'll do, too."

And, supplying the wants of Major Cool, the excited boniface gulped down a glass of raw whisky, then with renewed nimbleness of tongue launched forth:

"Et's a derned shame, gen'lemen, thet a purty leetle gal sh'ud be picked up es a victim fer sech a bandy-shanked, up-ended serpent ov sin an' deception es that 'ar mountain thief, Cap'n Trackless; but sech war ther case, an' ef my gal Leola hedn't 'a' bin a ginuine chip off ov her pairental pap—w'ich same is me—she'd 'a' bin toted off this night. Thet's w'ot!"

"See ther blood on ther floor? Wal, w'en ther rumpus bruck out at High-Card Hank's place, like a rip-roarin' ole fool, I piked out, cur'us es a Yankee ter see ther fracas, leavin' ther Lay-out in ther han's ov my leetle gal."

"An' w'en I got back, w'at did I find? Two ov Cap'n Trackless's kiotes kickin' their last, drilled thro' an' thro'! An' ther gal stood right hyar, carm es a May mornin', her guns still a-smokin'!"

"Thet's w'at, gen'lemen! W'ile I war out, two ov ther masked devils hed sneaked in an' tried ter steal Leola—on'y ter hev their lights snuffed out quicker'n flash-lightning! Jes—"

"Three cheers fer ther gal—Leola, ther queen—"

Crack—crack! The two reports stung sibilantly through the bar-room, checking the bellying words of the tough and wringing from him a howl of pain.

"You, Cimarron Jack!—dare you utter my daughter's name again, and your life—not your ears—shall pay the forfeit! Go, and never again cross the threshold of Peter Grattan!"

Thus spoke Uncle Peg, his voice loud and strained with intense passion, as the smoke curled lazily up from the muzzles of his weapons.

The crowd parted right and left. Simultaneously, Cimarron Jack shot out the door, his dusky face distorted with rage and pain, a tiny stream of blood trickling down each side of his head.

"We'll declare thet p'intsettled 'thout further argyment," grimly uttered the boniface, the wrathful glow leaving his countenance with the hurried departure of the rough. "'Tain't often I bubble over 'ith bile, but—ye all understand ther sarcumstances? Ov course."

"Now ter get at this hyar leetle matter I started ter tell ye about. Cap'n Trackless failed in his attempt ag'in me an' mine ter-night. I shall go 'im one better, ef et takes my other laig! At daybreak, 'ith a picked party, I'm goin' on ther war-path; an' w'en we meet ther fight will be Jedge Lynch versus ther Tigers ov ther Trail! Thet's w'ot!"

A buzz of excitement followed Uncle Peg's warlike declaration.

"Say the word, old man, and I am 'with you," said Major Cool, quietly. "I owe this Captain Trackless one, and it mightn't be a bad idea to join forces."

"Putt 'er thar, pard!" and Grattan enthusiastically extended his broad palm. Then with a mysterious look he lowered his voice and went on hurriedly: "Make an excuse jest soon es ye kin an' go through ther hall ter ther second door, an' thar knock twice. I'm puttin' my trust in ye es a white man, now. My darter wishes ter see ye!"

The adventurer repressed a slight start, and bent a quick, half-suspicious at Grattan's honest face and without apparent hesitation he replied: "I will go, and at once."

Leaving the bar-room, he strode along the rude hall, pausing at the second door, where in accordance with the landlord's instructions he rapped twice.

A moment, then his quick ear detected the faint rustling of feminine garments. A key clicked in the lock, and the door swung open.

Major Cool stood spell-bound.

Could this radiant being confronting him have aught in common with burly, uncouth Peter Grattan, the landlord of the Lay-out?

"You are Major Cool?"

"I am Major Cool, Miss Grattan," and the bewildered sport awkwardly lifted his hat.

"Walk in; be seated—I will detain you but a moment," said the landlord's daughter earnestly, and as Major Cool complied she closed the door.

"You have enemies in Chispa Canyon?"

"It is my fate, lady, to make enemies wherever I go."

The next instant the adventurer bit his lip in vexation. A look of suspicion—almost of alarm—had crossed the face of Leola Grattan. Her dark eyes dilated a trifle. With a strange quiver in her sweet voice, she said:

"Make enemies? You must be a de—"

"A free-lance, Miss Grattan," cut in the major with an easy bow. "Here to-day, there to-morrow—pretty near white, and fairly overflowing with the milk of human kindness. And it is my misfortune, in helping the weaker, to incur the enmity of the stronger."

"True," assented the girl; "I have seen enough of mining-camp life to understand that such may often be the case."

"But in the present instance, your enemies are not of the class you mention. They are men inimical to you because of the prominence you are likely to assume in the practice of—of—your profession, shall I call it?"

"Profession be it," and the sport smiled blandly.

"Well, the gambler known as High-Card Hank is the arch-spirit among these parties, and, at his instigation, it has been decreed that you must die!"

An odd smile curled the lips of the adventurer. His blue eyes narrowly yet unobtrusively swept the pallid face of the girl.

"How know you this?" he asked.

"I overheard the plot between Cimarron Jack and—"

Leola Grattan paused abruptly, bending her head in a listening attitude.

"I was sure I heard a stealthy step in the hall," she observed, a peculiar light-sparkling in her dark eyes.

Just then came a sharp rap. Crossing the room, the landlord's daughter opened the door. The lights in the hallway had been extinguished. On the threshold stood a masked man!

Major Cool leaped to his feet, his hands dropping to his weapons.

Too late; a strong arm encircled the waist of the girl, lifting her swiftly through the doorway. At the same instant a round missile, with hissing fuse attached, hurtled through space, straight at the breast of the sport.

A swift rush of feet along the hall, a piercing scream, and then a terrific explosion shook the building!

CHAPTER V.

BUNCO BEN SCORES A POINT.

"MERCIFUL heavens! we are lost!"

With the ringing forth of that wild cry from the lips of Aurelia Osman, Fighting Frank, the young guide, swung around like one electrified—only to see his fair *protegee* drop inert and senseless on the rough floor.

Apparently oblivious of all else that was transpiring around him—of High-Card Hank's rapid firing, and the nonchalant utterances of Major Cool—of the Canyonites' portentous mutterings, and the leveled weapons of the Tigers of the Trail—conscious only of the distress of the girl, the Featherweight darted to her side, determined to rescue her—to fight a way through his surrounding perils, even at the risk of death.

Lifting Miss Osman from the floor, and supporting her with his right arm, the young guide hastily surveyed his surroundings.

The next instant the sharp crack of Major Cool's weapon rung through the room, to be swiftly followed by the volley which left the ill-starred place enshrouded in the blackest gloom.

But, brief as had been the time left the dauntless youth in which to choose his course, he had noted well his surroundings, and the pall of darkness was an aid rather than a detriment to his plans.

That escape by the entrance in front was impossible, had been apparent at a glance. Only one other avenue offered itself—a narrow door at the rear of the room; and toward this Fighting Frank stole with catlike tread, his quick ear noting each varying phase of the conflict raging in the gloom behind him.

Had he not been burdened with the responsibility of getting Aurelia Osman safely away, nothing just then could have yielded him a

greater degree of satisfaction than to have turned and joined hands with the redoubtable Old Buckeye against the notorious Captain Trackless.

For these two, the giant ranger and the Featherweight, were sworn friends—had battled side by side on more than one eventful occasion against their common foes, outlaws and redskins.

Then, too, the evil eye of road-agent chief had fallen covetously upon Aurelia Osman—a fact in itself amply sufficient to arouse the deadliest enmity of the girl's devoted champion.

And, vividly recalling in the brief space of time occupied in traversing the distance to the rear door, the startling words uttered by his *protegee* at sight of Major Cool, Fighting Frank mentally set it down that this handsome adventurer, too, was in some way inimical to Carleton Osman and his daughter—a conclusion which instantly put the major beyond the pall of the young guide's friendship.

Arrived at the door the Featherweight halted, bending his head to listen.

A stealthy footfall at a few paces distant proved the precaution well taken. He had been followed.

Quickly but stealthily his hand sought the fastenings of the door—a heavy wooden bar, resting in strong sockets; but tug as he might at the barricade, yield it would not.

Meanwhile the pantherish footfalls drew dangerously near, and it was apparent that no fewer than four men were groping about in search of the Featherweight and his fair charge, and that each and all were making the door their objective point.

Fighting Frank realized that there was not an instant's time to lose. These fellows could have but one object in creeping upon him—murder, and the abduction of Miss Osman.

Gliding a short distance away from the door, the young scout deposited his helpless burden on the floor, close against the wall. Then he turned, each hand clasping the butt of a heavy revolver, a fierce sparkle in his bright hazel eyes boding ill to the assassins of the Canyon.

Locating his enemies as nearly as possible in the darkness, the Featherweight swiftly glided forward. The next moment a heavy, dull report rung out, clear and distinct above the firing at the opposite end of the room. A stifled oath, the sound of a body falling heavily to the floor, and then—

Crack—crack—crack!

A regular fusillade of pistol-shots, as the young guide whirled hither and thither—now here, then there; and, ere the smoke had ceased to curl from the muzzles of his revolvers, he had retreated as silently as he had advanced.

Again his hands sought the bar. A mighty effort, and it yielded, allowing the door to swing inward upon its hinges.

"Quick—pards! quick!—fer ther—ther—"

The broken utterance ended in a hollow, gurgling sound, faint but chilling. The warning of the wounded assassin had been checked by death!

Yet, a swift rush of feet followed, showing that the survivors were on the alert, and desperately in earnest.

Followed, but too late! A dark shade loomed up in the doorway—Fighting Frank, with Aurelia Osman clasped in his arms!

For the briefest measurable space of time, the young guide stood at an equipoise, then shot out with a long leap from the solid threshold, to whirl downward with fearful velocity through space—down—down—the terrible descent ending with a sullen splash far below!

"Great God! by death swift an' sure they hev escaped us!" grated a cold, hard voice. "Rustle, pards, an' dump thet stiff back thar inter ther Devil's Whirlpool arter 'em, then close an' bar ther door, fer mum's ther word—'twon't do fer ther boss ter know *how* we failed!"

"Drat it! it's Yellow Dan w'ot's got his fit ov sickness this time," cautiously declared a second of the foiled assassins. "Lay a-bolt, pards, an' quick—Cimarron Jack's right. Dern me, ef I want enny hornets' nest a-buzzin' 'bout my ears!"

A huddling together of the shadowy forms—a swift, silent march to the open door; then the corpse of Yellow Dan hurtled down into the yawning abyss beyond the threshold. The door noiselessly closed, the bar dropped back into its socket, and the assassins skurried away in the darkness, leaving unsolved the mystery surrounding the fate of the gallant Featherweight and his *protegee*.

Shift we now the scene from Chispa Canyon's confines to that lonesome spot on the river trail

at which Major Cool an hour before had met and defeated Bunco Ben and his outlaw pards.

Silence once more brooded over the uncanny spot, unbroken save by the swash and swirl of the river's wavelets—by the restless souging of the wind.

Near the water's edge lay three figures, grim and bloodstained, shrouded in darkness. The one to the right and the one to the left were rigid in death; but the central form writhed and twisted in silent agony.

"Be I in purgatory?" he muttered fiercely, in a weak, scarcely audible voice. "Cain't be *thet*; fer, Bunco Ben, ye hev bin too tough a galoot ter git even a ghost ov a chaine fer a stop-over on ther road ter Satan's kingdom!"

"No! no! ye aire yit hangin' on ter ther aidge ov ther land ov ther livin'—an' I reckon ye aire not so fur gone but w'ot ye'll make a desp'rit rustle ter git back on ter life's *terra firma*."

"But ef I hain't in purgatory, *whar* be I? Le'me—Kerrect, fu'st time! Rid down by Major Cool, ov the Gold Bug, I war; an' a thousand ter one Mex an' Dan war swatted fer 'tarnal keeps by ther smooth cuss, fer now I mind thet he fired twice, jest as his hoss's feet lifted the breath out ov me."

An oath gave a vicious tone to the last words of the wounded outlaw, and with something of an effort he raised himself upon his elbow, to grope about in search of his whilom allies.

"Yaas, they hes passed in their checks," he continued, as his hand encountered first one and then the other of the lifeless bodies. "An' ef I 'members right, thet same Major Cool aire no slouch—he played et on us purty darn fine, an' no mistake."

"Then he rid off 'ith a hull hide, too!"

Faint as was the voice in which these words were uttered, its strains were expressive of both disgust and chagrin.

Assuming a sitting posture, Bunco Ben for a full minute blinked moodily across the phosphorescent wavelets, his shaggy brows knitted, striving to collect his scattered thoughts.

Then forth from one of his pockets he drew a flask of liquor, and after a copious draught, scrambled to his feet.

"Reckon et mought be jest es well ter scoop in w'ot leetle dust I kin find on Dan an' Mex," he soliloquized, as he steadied himself. "Arter thet—wal, mebbe et hain't too late yit ter overhaul ther major, an' turn our Waterloo inter a s'prise party. Ef ther hosses—"

The sentence ended with an oath, and the outlaw plunged abruptly into the undergrowth fringing the base of the hill. A moment's reconnaissance proved that the animals had not been molested, and he reappeared and set to work at the ghoully task of stripping his dead pards of their weapons and revolvers.

Scarcely had Bunco Ben completed this operation, when a faint but regular plashing of the water, out near the middle of the stream, and a short distance above him, attracted his attention.

Instantly the outlaw was alert and on his guard. Sinking flat upon his breast, he peered steadily across the water.

A dark object, not unlike the head and shoulders of a man, was just visible above the surface, moving slowly down-stream.

"A galoot from Chispa Canyon, most likely," mentally decided Bunco Ben, his hand instinctively seeking one of the weapons in his girdle. "Thet's it—a galoot from ther Canyon. Chock full an' tumbled inter ther river, mayhap. Sech bein' ther case, an' this bein' the fu'st spot below ther camp at w'ich he c'd leave ther drink, w'y, w'ot more nateral then thet he sh'd—By gum! here he kems, sure enuff!"

The Trail Tiger had spoken truly. The man in the water was now heading for the bank.

"He aire eyther hurted, or hes a load ter kerry," mentally continued Bunco Ben, as the slow, labored plashing drew nearer. "All ther same, w'ot kems ter my net ter-night aire fish. He will strike ther shore not ten feet above hyar, an'—"

"Ha! He hes a woman on his arm!"

And the outlaw almost sprung erect in his excitement.

"By ther Lord ov Israel! Bunco Benjy, now play yer hand keeful, an' ye may score a ten-strike," he muttered, curbing himself. "A man an' a woman driftin' down from Chispa Canyon means—w'ot? A weazel-skin ov vargin dust, mebbe! Who knows?"

Whereupon, with a subdued chuckle, the Trail Tiger seemed to shrink yet closer to the earth, his eyes glowing with a hateful light, his hands nestling close upon the butts of his

weapons, his entire being thrilled with wolfish eagerness at the prospect for plunder.

"Thar! he's struck sool water, an' is wadin' ashore," Bunco Ben averred, a moment later. "Jist a minute, an' he'll be on dry land, b'gosh!"

True enough; and as the foot of the man from the river pressed the rough trail, his voice—low and husky, as if weakened by prolonged exertion—broke the grim silence, saying:

"Thank Heaven! danger of death by the river is past, Rella, dear. It now remains for us to get back to the camp yonder as quickly as possible."

Then, in a clear, feminine voice:

"But Captain Trackless and the outlaws, Frank—"

"Are no doubt well out of Chispa Canyon before this, Rella. As I have told you, a deadly fight was waging in the House of Gold at the moment I sprung with you from the rear door of the gambling-house into the river. Such a struggle could be but brief, and have but one ending—the swift retreat of the outlaws when their object had been obtained."

The lurking Trail Tiger started as if stabbed.

"Fightin' Frank! by the great horn spoon!" he gritted, his yellow fangs almost meeting in his nether lip. "An' ther gal—who kin she be? Aurelia Osman, fer a forty dollar bill! Su'thin' wrong, somewhar, but whar?"

"Et aire a ticklish job 'ith that game-cock ter buck ag'in', but et aire dead sartin now thet I must snare ther pair ov 'em!"

Fighting Frank—the man from the river was none other—resumed:

"We are on the Canyon trail, and it is quite likely that Captain Trackless and his men are now between us and the camp. We will push forward cautiously. The trail is bordered with dense undergrowth on the hillside, and at a moment's notice we can conceal ourselves until the Tigers have passed us."

"I am particularly anxious to reach the camp with you as soon as possible, so as to convey to your father intelligence of your escape. Tomorrow, if he sees fit, an expedition can be sent against the secret stronghold of the Trail Tigers."

A sound suggestive of an osculatory caress followed the words, then an exchange of tenderly-uttered sentences.

Whatever may have been the perils of the youthful pair, it was quite apparent that a new and sweet joy had crept into their lives during the brief while they had been swept onward by the river's mad current.

Dripping wet, chilled through and through, they, arm-in-arm, set off at a sharp walk up the trail, heading for the distant lights of Chispa Canyon.

A dozen paces—then the Featherweight staggered, dropped to his knees, then upon his face, stricken senseless by a heavy blow from the butt of Bunco Ben's revolver.

The next instant Aurelia Osman was struggling desperately in the grasp of her outlaw foe.

CHAPTER VI.

A STARTLING DISCOVERY.

"HANK!—The bridge, and at once."

"UGLY UPTON."

A crumpled bit of paper bearing the above words found its way into the slender palm of the Faro King of Chispa Canyon just as he parted company with Major Cool at the bar of the House of Gold.

Surreptitiously delivered, the message was covertly scanned, then torn into minute shreds.

"Ugly Upton!" ejaculated High-Card Hank, inaudibly, a strange look creeping over his white face. "I must meet him at once. The rascal would never venture here did he not have something of importance to communicate. He came alone, too, for he was not with the chief's party."

A word here, another there, to the *attaches* of the place, then the gambler turned and strode out into the streets of the camp.

Straightway he laid his course toward the rude bridge over Pilgrim's Path, moving swiftly, yet fully alert for lurking danger, his hands upon the weapons protruding from his silken sash.

Arrived midway of the bridge, he halted, uttering a sound in exact imitation of the chirping of a cricket.

A full minute passed in silence. Then a dark shade crept out from the blacker shadows hanging over the bases of the towering rocks. The next instant the gambler's signal was answered.

"It is you, Up?" queried High-Card Hank, in a guarded voice.

"Yaas; come on!" was the impatient response.

"You sent for me?" continued the gambler, halting face to face with his villainous ally.

"I putt ther note in yer fist at yer place; I hain't forgot ther ole dogs, Hank; an' when our trails crossed a week ago, an' I promised ter keep eyes and ears open, 't wa'n't jest *talk*. Putt 'er thar, pard!"

There was a dogged earnestness in the man's heavy, husky tones. The gambler winced under the pressure of his strong hand.

"Bout this hyar gal matter, Hank," went on Ugly Upton, abruptly. "Ye hev struck ther wrong lead."

"The wrong lead? How?"

"Ye seek ther heiress ov Ezra, the Miser?"

"Yes."

"Ter marry her ducats?"

"Just so."

"Now, I aire a tuff pill, Pard Hank—Ugly by name an' ugly by nater, too; but I aire squeamish on this hyer one leetle p'int. Howsimever, ef ye r'ally mean ter marry ther—"

"I do—positively!"

"Ducats or no ducats?"

"Exactly."

"Bekase yer love the gal?"

"Yes."

"Putt 'er thar, pard! Ye aire on ther road up hill! Glad yer heart aire got on ther gal as well as yer head on her dust, fer sech bein' ther case I aire with ye till ther knot aire tied."

"But ye will marry ther gal fer herself alone, fer ov lucre she hes none!"

"Ha! what is that?" and High-Card Hank started violently.

"Anreha Osn. an aire not ther heiress ov Ezra, ther Miser, es yer hev bin led ter suppose," coolly averred Ugly Upton, inwardly chuckling at the ill-concealed chagrin and discomfiture of his ally.

An oath slipped from between the hard-set teeth of the gambler.

"Curse it! you are toying with me now, Up! Have a care, or I may forget that we are friends. You—"

"Easy, Paul Parkerton! Don't excite yerself," cut in the Trail Tiger, unabashed. "Listen ter w'at I hev ter say, an' mebbe—Wal, ye'll jest transfer yer deep-sot affections ter heiress No. 2, I reckon!"

"Red Joaquin, or Cap'n Trackless, aire, es ye may know, none other than Ezra Grimshaw, ther nephew ov Ezra, ther Miser."

"Yes, I know."

"An', through him ye war led ter b'lieve thet ther darter ov Carleton Osman war ther heiress ov ther Miser?"

"It was through him. I have kept tab on ther girl and her father for upward of a year. By merest chance they ventured into this country, and to better my chances of winning the girl, I paid her uncle, Captain Trackless, a good round sum to abduct her. Curse it! The scheme was working as fine as silk, when that meddling young fool, Fighting Frank, the guide, waltzed in and spoiled the combination!"

A sound closely allied to a chuckle escaped Ugly Upton at the conclusion of the gambler's testily-uttered words.

"Pard Hank, ye hev bin played fer a sucker," he averred, without the slightest hesitancy. "Ezra Grimshaw aire no more ther uncle ov Aurelia Osman than I be—an' he knows et!"

The sport of the House of Gold started sharply.

"What mean you?" he demanded.

"You war told thet this hyar Osman gal war r'ally Louise Dauthett?"

"Yes."

"Then don't cuss the Featherweight fer blockin' yer game, but rather thank 'im. Aurelia Osman aire no more Louise Dauthett than she aire Queen Vic. Ther chief lied."

"Lied!"

"Exactly; Louise Dauthett, ther real heiress, aire hyar in Chispa Canyon—an' hes bin since ther earliest day ov ther camp."

"Impossible!"

"True as gospel, I tell ye! She aire known as Leola Grattan, ther landlord's darter!"

There was a positive ring in the tones of Ugly Upton that carried conviction direct to his hearer.

"But how know you all this?" the latter demanded, after a moment's silence.

The Trail Tiger laughed softly.

"You an' I be friends, Pard Hank," he replied. "I promised ter keep my ears open, an' I hev done it. Ther captain hes a way ov babbling in his sleep. Understand?"

"Yes; but go on—what have you learned?"

"Jest this—thet Ezra Grimshaw, together with Paul Parkerton, killed Ezra the Miser, ther uncle ov ther fu'st, fer his money—which

same they failed ter git; thet Peter Dauthett a brother-in-law ov ther Miser, war s'pected ov there crime, an' thet 'pearances war so strong ag'in' him thet he fled atween two days 'ith his only child, a gal, to whom it hes been since discovered ther money ov old Ezra war left by will.

"I learned more—thet Ezra Grimshaw an' Paul Parkerton had connived ter throw s'picion upon Dauthett, an' thet both soon arterward disappeared—goin' none knew whar.

"I learned, too, that Ezra Grimshaw by mere chance stumbled upon Dauthett an' his darter, an' agin begun plottin' fer ther fortune. Then, at ther eleventh hour, Paul Parkerton 'pears on ther scene as han'som an' as devilish as ever, ter shy his castor inter ther ring, an' Grimshaw, fearin' thet his old-time pard may eucher him in ther game fer gold, trumps up a tale in w'ich he makes Aurelia Osman appear as Louise Dauthett, an' so draws Parkerton off on a blind lead.

"I learned even more than this. Eylan Buck, ther half-brother of Ezra Grimshaw, hed taken an oath ter avenge ther death ov ther miser, an' war only bidin' his time. He, too, hed fallen into ther belief thet Aurelia Osman war Louise Dauthett. Some time this afternoon he entered ther chief's quarters, overpowered ther captain, disguised himself as Red Joaquin, an' with ther girl went ter ther House ov Gold. W'at happened thar ye know. Grimshaw succeeded in raisin' an alarm, an' with a strong party putt out hot-foot fer ther camp.

"But he failed ter bag his game; an', Pard Hank, I reckon thet somewhar hyar in Chispa Canyon ye hev' ther wu'st foe a mortal man c'u'd hev.

"Now ye know why I ventured inter ther camp an' hed ye come hyar."

The gambler drew a hard breath.

"It is a favor that I shall not soon forget, Up," he declared. "With that man here, and on my trail, I shall know no rest.

"Up, he must die!"

Hardened wretch though he was, Ugly Upton could not repress a slight shiver at the coldly-uttered words of the sport of the House of Gold.

"He must die," reiterated High-Card Hank. "I felt that he and I were mortal foes the moment he entered my place to-night, although he came disguised as Red Joaquin.

"But this mother of the heiress—are you sure that Leola Grattan is none other than Louise Dauthett?"

"Positive," returned the Trail Tiger. "Not only hev I heard Grimshaw say so much, but I, too, knew Peter Dauthett ov old; an', though he aire greatly changed, he an' Peg-Leg Pete aire one an' ther same."

The gambler gnawed his lip in savage vexation.

"What a fool I have been!" he exclaimed, bitterly. "I could have won Leola Grattan had I tried; now it is too late for fair means!"

"One thing more, Pard Hank, an' then I must be off fer camp afore ther chief s'pects that all aire not right 'ith yours truly," continued Ugly Upton.

"Et aire about this hyar Major Cool I want ter speak. Ye—"

"Ha! Major Cool!" brusquely interjected the gambler. "If you know aught of him, speak!"

"I know only this—he aire not w'ot he seems. He hain't no more ther George Washington Cool who aire ter open up ther Gold Bug than you or I be!"

"He is—"

"A detective spy, leagued 'ith Eylan Buck," quietly finished the Trail Tiger.

"The devil and Tom Walker!"

"Jest sech a team, Pard Hank."

"But now I hev sed my say, an' I am off fer camp. Ef thar's ennything new ter report, tomorrow at this hour, I'll be hyar."

As he ceased speaking, the Trail Tiger turned and glided away in the darkness.

"One bumper all around, boys, and then it is business, for I've work for you—red work—to do before the light of another day."

In the slowest of measured accents, yet with the tone of one who had no time to flitter away, spoke the Faro King of Chispa Canyon, his cat-like orbs fairly scorching the bronzed faces of his two auditors with the intense fierceness of his gaze.

Cimarron Jack and an ugly, beetling-browed ruffian, known by the accurately descriptive title of Tough Teddy, were these two latter parties. The trio were seated at a poker-table in the private apartment of High-Card Hank—a little snugery located directly above the bar of

the House of Gold and reached only by a secret stairway.

Immediately upon his return from his conference with Ugly Upton, the gambler had sought out these two of his villainous tools and conducted them to this hidden retreat.

At the significant declaration of his chief, Tough Teddy paused in the act of helping himself to a liberal potation of whisky from a bottle on the table, and stared hard at his *confreres*, a look of mock astonishment on his round, red face.

"Work?—red work?" he repeated. "Thet means—w'ot?"

"Guv yer tongue a chainece ter cool," growled Cimarron Jack, with an oath. "Ef ther cap'n hes dug up ther hatchet, I'll be bound he'll lay down ther map ov ther campaign in a jiffy."

"Oh! in course!" assented Teddy, blandly, just a trace of a grin lurking about the corners of his well-developed mouth. "An' I reckon ef thar's a chainece offered ter turn an honest penny we're ther galoots ter work ther leetle trick, too."

"There's no question on that point," High-Card Hank dryly observed. "But punish your liquor, boys, and give me your undivided attention. We must understand each other thoroughly, for the wrinkle to be worked is a desperate one, requiring not only the fiery courage to be derived from a brief communion with John Barleycorn, but steady nerves and cool heads as well."

"We are listenin', chief," and Cimarron Jack settled down with his elbows upon the edge of the table, his head craned forward in readiness to drink in the most cautiously-uttered word. "An' yer voice'll be music ter our ears, fer times is mighty hard," chinned in Tough Teddy, with a doleful sigh.

"I've a yellow lining for your pockets, never fear," quoth the gambler, his cruel eyes seeming to read the brace of ruffians through and through.

"You have seen this Major Cool?"

Cimarron Jack and his ally started sharply, dismay plainly depicted on their evil faces, and the latter exclaimed:

"Ther new sport! We hes, an' a hard boss ter carry he aire, too!"

"No doubt; but with two against one you should be able to snuff his candle, and that, too, without much risk. See here," and abruptly leaving the table, High-Card Hank crossed the room, to bring forth from its receptacle a small bright metallic object of spherical form.

It needed no second glance to tell the ruffians at the table the nature of the glistening sphere; for, at sight of its short pendent fuse, both instantly realized the portent of the gambler's plot against the stranger-sport.

"Oho! I guess we kin take ther trick!" exclaimed Cimarron Jack, chuckling evilly.

Tough Teddy remained quiet, a half-fearful expression on his face.

A devilish light sparkling in his eyes, a malignant smile curling his thin lips, High-Card Hank held up to view the deadly missile, saying:

"It holds within its narrow walls the power to destroy a dozen lives, a dozen times over! This Major Cool may be one man in a thousand, but let him stand in the pathway of a missile such as this, and his race is run!"

"He must die to-night—within the hour! His presence here bodes ill to all within Chispa Canyon. He is not what he seems. He is an accursed detective spy!"

The sport of the House of Gold had spoken in strains cold and hard, his wicked eyes lighting up with a tigerish glare. When he concluded, both of his hirelings had sprung to their feet, their faces betraying every evidence of deep-seated alarm.

"A detective!" uttered Tough Teddy.

"Yes, a detective!" High-Card Hank enunciated, "and he is not alone. Before the break of day he will be joined by others. They are piping that Silver City job, and they are hot on the trail!"

At this significant declaration, Cimarron Jack and his pard stared blankly at each other, utterly dazed. Truly, the arch-plotter was playing his part with consummate skill!

A moment only the two sat motionless; then their hands met in a strong clasp above the rough deal table.

The die was cast!

"It is well," observed the sport of the House of Gold, noting the action. "A few words with you, and then—to work!"

And, resuming his seat, the gambler carefully laid the bomb upon the table, then with his voice lowered to a whisper spoke rapidly for fully five minutes.

At the expiration of that time the two ruffians took their departure, carrying with them the murderous missile.

Left to himself, a startling change swept over High-Card Hank.

His ever-pallid face grew ghastly in its whiteness, and a look of absolute misery usurped the mad glow in his eyes. He seemed to shiver in every fiber!

"I am a coward!" he muttered, staring around uneasily. "At the eleventh hour—at the moment of all others when I must need a cool head and desperate courage, I am a woman in weakness!"

"But, no—it cannot be! Success is mine, and this weakness is but the reaction of my overwrought nerves."

"Cimarron Jack and his pard are stirred to desperation by my cleverly-concocted story. Poor fools! my neck, not theirs, was in danger of the halter!"

"But they will carry out my red work, to the letter, and abduct the peerless Lola, the heiress of Ezra, the Miser. Here's to fresh courage, and to success, and then I must be off to the rendezvous!"

And hastily draining a glass of raw whisky, the sport of the House of Gold extinguished the light and left the secret apartment.

CHAPTER VII.

THE DESPERADOES' DOOM.

WHEN the dashing free-lance, Major Cool, left the bar-room of the Lay-out to meet the landlord's daughter, his movements were narrowly watched by eyes other than those of honest Peter Grattan—eyes in whose depths lurked a gleam boding murder!

For mingling with well-assumed carelessness with the throng—so near the bold adventurer, in fact, that he heard every word passing between him and Peg-Leg Pete—was no less a personage than High-Card Hank's hired assassin, Tough Teddy.

The ruffian and his ally, Cimarron Jack, had proceeded direct from the secret apartment of the House of Gold to the bar-room of the Lay-out, intent on sighting their victim, then hounding him to death.

Just in time they were, too, for Major Cool entered the place, but a moment in advance of them, having just finished a leisurely stroll through the confines of the camp.

Desperadoes of the most brutish order were these two hired assassins—specimens of the lowest stratum of the gold-camp. Work—delve for the "yellow god" they would not, but for the virgin metal they stood ready to stain their souls with any crime, however black and foul.

Had High-Card Hank hunted the wide West over, two creatures better suited to his purpose could not have been found. So long as no depth of cunning, no high degree of courage, no extra mental or physical exertion, was a requirement necessary to success, they fitted the deed precisely.

Of the two, Tough Teddy was by far the more dangerous man. He was quieter, more secretive. No warning ever preceded a blow from his hand. He witnessed the discomfiture of his ally at the hands of bluff old Peter Grattan with a certain degree of satisfaction. He felt safer, more at ease, in the mapping-out of his dastardly work with Cimarron Jack out of the way for the time being.

No sooner had Major Cool departed in accordance with the brief message given him by Peg-Leg Pete, than Tough Teddy sauntered out into the street of the camp.

Perfectly familiar with the interior arrangements of the Lay-out, the ruffian had instantly decided upon a plan of action.

At the southwest corner of the building, he was rejoined by Cimarron Jack, who had been lying in wait; and, after a brief conference, both stole silently along in the dark shadow of the south wall of the rambling structure, to a side door within a few paces of the verge of Devil's Lane.

Here they halted, and Tough Teddy rapped thrice upon the door, his knuckles striking the wood softly and producing a sound once heard not easily forgotten.

A moment; then a wicket in the door opened and a pair of gleaming black eyes peered forth.

"*Madri de Dios!* is it you, Carrajo?" demanded a rich feminine voice of strongly-marked Mexican accent.

The desperado replied:

"Carrajo, Inez. Now hasten, for I would see you."

Instantly, the wicket closed, and in the merest fraction of time the door swung slightly open and the woman glided out.

"Ha! Carrajo! you have a friend?"

"A friend, Inez. But step hither," and Tough Teddy glided toward the verge of the abyss.

The woman followed.

"You are alone to-night?" queried the desperado, halting on the brink of Devil's Lane.

"Alone," replied the woman, wonderingly. "Why ask?"

A strong hand roughly clutched her throat effectually shutting off the power of utterance. A long, cruel blade flashed downward through the black shadows, to sink to the hilt in her quivering bosom! A faint splashing of the waters at the bottom of Devil's Lane, and the damning deed was consummated!

The next moment Tough Teddy rejoined Cimarron Jack.

"Ther coast aire cl'ar?" asked the latter.

"Clear," was the curt reply. "Now follow me, an' see thet ye aire ready fer hot work at close quarters."

Cautiously pushing open the door, the two men silently entered the apartment from which the woman Inez had been enticed to meet her death.

Opposite them was an open door, leading into the hallway running the length of the house.

In the hall the two assassins halted a moment.

"Now comes ther tick'lish part ov ther job," observed Tough Teddy softly, as he carefully noted his surroundings. "Ther major an' ther landlord's darter aire in ther second room back ov ther bar. We must get ther gal in our han's, then down ther sport 'ith ther bomb."

"Putt out ther light, Jack, w'ile I fasten ther door at ther front end ov ther hall, then stan' ready ter cl'ar ther way fer me."

Each man quietly performed the part assigned him, then the two met before the door of the room in which was Major Cool.

"Slip on your mask," advised Cimarron Jack, in a whisper. "If anything goes wrong, we don't want ter stretch hemp ef we kin dodge ther halter."

"Kerrect," assented Tough Teddy. "Aire ye ready?"

"Ready! I've lighted ther fuse!"

"Then hyar goes!" and the desperado rapped sharply on the door.

The sound of light footsteps within, then it swung open, revealing Leola Grattan on the threshold!

Instantly the strong arm of Tough Teddy encircled her waist, lifting her bodily from the floor.

At the same juncture, Cimarron Jack hurled the bomb straight at the breast of Major Cool!

"Quick now!" sharply uttered Tough Teddy, as a piercing scream broke from the lips of the landlord's daughter. "We mus'—"

A terrific explosion filled the hiatus, almost hurling the fleeing assassins from their feet.

The next instant they reached the deserted apartment of the woman Inez.

"Fasten the hall door a'ter ye!" fairly hissed Tough Teddy, as he bounded swiftly toward the side entrance, his broad palm closed firmly over the mouth of his captive.

Outside the building they halted a moment, then glided swiftly toward the bridge over Pilgrim's Path, laying the course along the brink of Devil's Lane.

Two minutes later and they were beyond the confines of the camp, skulking like hunted beasts in the black shadows of the rocks.

It needed no second glance to tell them that Chispa Canyon was fully aroused—that, if detected and captured, even swift-handed Judge Lynch would be too slow to mete out to them their doom!

Armed men were beginning to dart hither and thither through the street of the camp, while in and about the Lay-out all was commotion.

"Go ye back thar, Jack," said Tough Teddy. "Ef ye rustle, ye've time. Twon't do fer ther two ov us ter be missed. I'll take ther gap up ter ther cave."

"Cain't see et!" growled the ruffian surlily. "Cain't ye see thet I'm marked 'ith ther bullets ov Peg-Leg Pete? They'd hop onto me, fu'st jump!"

"One ov us must go back," declared Tough Teddy. "Twon't do fer us both ter be away from camp—you know why!"

"Bekase we must keep an eye on ther boss!" averred Cimarron Jack, with a sort of grim chuckle. "But et won't be me as does et!"

"Then take ther gal."

"I'll do it."

The ruffian put out his hands as if to receive the captive. The next instant he felt a keen, prickling sensation in his left side.

It needed no words to tell him that he had been stabbed!

"Cuss ye!" he grated, swaying slightly to one side, "we aire playin' ther same game! Who wins?"

Even as he spoke, his keen blade sunk to the hilt in the throat of his fellow-desperado.

Tough Teddy had been overmatched. He sunk to the ground, with the life-blood gushing in a crimson torrent from his mouth and nostrils.

Meanwhile, no cry—no sound, however slight—escaped Leola Grattan.

"Swooned, by all thet's good!" muttered Cimarron Jack, as he bent over his helpless captive.

"Sech bein' ther case, I'll relieve Teddy ov w'at leetle stuff he may hev. A'ter thet, I'll putt him whar he putt ther woman Inez!"

But it was destined that the desperado should not carry out the above programme.

The sound of rapid footsteps on the bridge caused him to start guiltily. Catching up the girl, he skulked stealthily away in the darkness, laying his course to the northeast along the eastern side of Pilgrim's Path, as had High-Card Hank the morning before.

Rough was the way—in the intense gloom utterly impossible to one less familiar with his surroundings than was Cimarron Jack.

And at the best that desperado's progress was slow, for his wounds, as well as the weight of the girl, told fast upon his strength.

At a point directly opposite the camp across the canyon, Cimarron Jack turned aside, and, passing a dense network of vines, entered the mouth of a small gully.

Here he deposited Leola Grattan on the ground, pinioning her wrists and inserting a rude gag between her jaws, and then seated himself on a rock for a breathing-spell.

Scarcely had he settled into a comfortable posture, however, when a fresh commotion in the camp below caused him to start erect in alarm.

"Good God!" he ejaculated, as he thrust aside the curtain of vines and peered forth. "Ther camp is afire!"

True enough; the frame structures known as the Lay-out and the House of Gold were a mass of seething flame!

"Ther bomb did et!" Cimarron Jack muttered as he glared down half-stupefied. "They aire fightin' ther fire. Poor fools! they might es well try ter level ther Rockies!"

"But I must up an' on ter ther cave, fer by St. Jago! this hyar spot aire es bright es day!" and the desperado turned to lift his captive from the ground.

Leola Grattan was gone!

Cimarron Jack stood astounded.

"Hell's furies! w'at means this?" he gasped, staring blankly around.

The foliage overhanging the southern side of the gully rustled crisply. A slight, willowy form confronted the assassin, stripping the weapons from his belt ere he could lift a hand!

"It means you are in ther wrong pew, you festive old outlaw!" responded a clear young voice, back of whose whimsical accent there was a world of deadly significance. "Reckon ye've as good as poked yer head inter ther lion's mouth!"

"An' jest consider yerself a corpse, Cimarron Jack, fer I hev spotted yer work—an' I'm goin' ter sock ye full ov lead!"

Astounded before, stricken almost dumb now that the muzzles of his own weapons were staring him in the face, the entrapped desperado could only find power to gasp:

"Cuss me! Ef it hain't ther Featherweight!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SABLE KNIGHT ERRANT.

A MILE eastward from Chispa Canyon, in a narrow pass running almost parallel to Pilgrim's Path, a man strode moodily to and fro, sentry-like, in the intense gloom, his head bowed down as if in well-nigh hopeless despair.

A man beyond middle age, tall and spare, with features strongly marked. His garb was of well-worn corduroy, with black slouch hat and high-topped boots. A belt of arms encircled his middle, and across the hollow of his arm rested a trusty Winchester.

For hours had he thus paced to and fro, anon pausing to listen, only to resume his restless walk with an impatient imprecation.

"Can it be that Frank has deserted me?" he muttered, for perhaps the hundredth time, as he halted in the Stygian gloom under the eastern wall of the pass. "I cannot believe it! He is a brave youth—one whose every impulse is honorable—a fast friend and a fair foe!"

"No! something has occurred to detain him.

Never would he desert me here, with my helpless child in the clutches of that merciless marauder, Captain Trackless.

"No! no! Frank will return, for my eyes have ferreted out his secret—that a cry of distress from my daughter's lips would pierce his heart as deeply as mine—that he loves, and is loved in return.

"But may he not come too late? That is the thought goading me to madness! Mayhap—

"Hark! that was a footstep!" and the lone sentinel of the pass was instantly on the alert, his rifle thrown forward, his finger resting lightly against the trigger.

"Halt! Who comes there?"

The challenge rung forth clear and sharp, yet in guarded tones.

A brief silence, then a broad chuckle, followed by the words:

"De Lor' bress me! ef 'tain't Mars' Osman dis bressed minute! An' he doesn't know de ole man, er-he-he! he-he! er-r!"

"Belzy! by heavens!" and there was a strain of undisguised joy in the voice of Carleton Osman.

"Yes, sah—hit am ole Belzy Golightly, Mars' Carleton, an' hit am a fac' dat I am monst'us glad dis heah cullud pusson hab foun' hissef—'deed I is, chile!"

The next instant Carleton Osman clasped hands with his black henchman. Rude and unlettered though the latter was, his companionship just then was most desirable.

Dark as was the place, the outlines of Golightly's form could be discerned. In height he was not above five feet; his shoulders were of great breadth and thickness, and his arms of unusual length. It was obvious at a glance that he possessed the strength of a Hercules.

Then, too, he was thoroughly armed, and Osman knew that he was master of his weapons.

"But wha's Frank, Mars' Osman?"

"He left here at sunset, going to Chispa Canyon to secure help, that we could make a descent upon the outlaw camp up the pass and rescue Miss Aurelia," was the reply. "At day-break this morning we struck the trail of the gang who attacked us, and we followed it until we discovered their lair."

"But where have you been? How came it that you allowed us to be taken by surprise this morning?"

"Dat was a poh'ful cu'us sahcumstance," mused Belzy, reflectively. "Yo' see, Mars' Osman, hit wah not dis chile's fault dat de camp wah s'prised. No, sah! 'Long jes' 'foh day-light, ole Belzy beah sumthin' little way up de Gap dat didn't hab jes' de right soun', an' so he mozeys off kinder quiet like ter 'seiver what hit wah."

"Den dat man Bunco Ben pounce down on de camp, stampede de stock an' 'tole off Miss 'Relia 'foh ole Belzy say 'Jack Robinson.' Yes, sah, hit wah jes' dat quick!"

"But, Mars' Osman, dis heah ole 'coon kotch on ter de trail ob Bunco Ben, an' follah hit right home. Yes, sah!"

"Den, jes' soon as night kem, Belzy slide down inter Cap'n Trackless's camp an' try fer ter kotch a look at de young misses. An—"

"You saw my child there?" swiftly interrogated Carleton Osman, catching the arm of his dusky companion, his breath coming hard and fast.

"'Foh de Lor', I jes' did, Mars' Osman," as hastily averred Golightly. "Dar am a cave up in de rocks t'other side ob de basin, an' dat am whar Miss 'Relia wah took."

"But when ole Belzy reached dat p'int, de leetle gal wah missin', an' Cap'n Trackless wah carryin' on wuss nur Ole Nick hissef. From all dis chile c'u'd beah, 'peared es ef some one had done stole de young misses an' toted her off ter Chispa Canyon."

Carleton Osman breathed a sigh of relief.

"Could it have been Frank?" he muttered, "But, no! that would have been impossible. Good heavens! my poor darling, may have fallen from bad hands into worse!"

"Dunno 'bout dat," crisply observed Belzy Golightly, "de big road-agent said hit wah Ole Buckeye, the Sierra Sleuth, wha't hed stolen de gal. Enyway, dey mos' all 'straddled hoss an' rode out ov de basin."

"Rode out of the basin? You are sure, Belzy?"

"Yes, sah!"

"Then there must be another hidden outlet from the place, for not a soul has passed here in full five hours."

"Dar am two passes, Mars' Osman—one ter go in, t'other ter go out," said the African, quietly. "Dey go in on dis one, an' out on t'other."

"But es soon es I foun' dar wah no use ter

stay in de camp any longer, I made tracks foh heah, foh I s'pected ter fin' yo' an' Mars' Frank roun' heah somewhar. Dey s'prised de camp on ole Belzy, but I reckon dat gen'men foxed 'em right home, Mars' Osman!"

There was a degree of pride in the tones of the sable scout which did not escape Carleton Osman. If to the neglect or carelessness of the former was due the disastrous surprise at Big Gap, he had at least done his best in atonement.

"You have done well, my faithful fellow," said Osman. "The question now is, shall we await Frank here, or make our way across the hills to Chispa Canyon? Of—"

"Hist!" sharply cautioned Belzy. "Sunthin' comin'—git back 'gin' de wall!"

"It's either Frank with a strong party, or the road-agents returning," Carleton Osman muttered the next moment, as the rapid hoofstrokes of a number of horses rung out sharp and clear through the narrow pass. "From the bold manner in which they approach, I would judge they were the latter."

"Kewrect!" softly assented Belzy. "Heah dey come!"

Even as the black spoke, the night-riders reached a point in the pass directly opposite them. At the same instant a harsh oath rung out.

"Imps ov Satan! ther guide hes escaped us!" roared a hoarse voice. "Halt, pards—we must look inter this!"

"Fighting Frank escaped, you say?"

"His saddle aire empty, cap'n."

"And the other captives?"

"Aire hyar, hard an' fast."

"Then, Bunco Ben, take half the men and scour the pass for the Featherweight. He is unarmed, and more dead than alive. With prompt action, you can likely recapture him before he can reach Chispa Canyon."

And as the lieutenant of the Trail Tigers rapidly told off the required number of men, Captain Trackless and the remainder, with the captives in their midst, rode on up the gorge.

Then, in accordance with a sharply-uttered order of Bunco Ben, seven of the road-agents dismounted to make a close search among the nooks and crevices in the abrupt walls of the pass, while he and the two remaining headed down the trail at a rapid gait.

"We must get out of here," uttered Carleton Osman, in the ear of his dusky companion. "Frank has been captured, and escaped, it seems, and they could as well search for a needle in a haystack as to attempt to find him. With us it is different. We must separate. Return to this spot in an hour."

To this Belzy Golightly murmured a low assent, and they at once glided away in opposite directions—Carleton Osman laying his course down the pass.

Ten minutes passed in silence, unbroken save by the signals of the prowling road-agents. Then there suddenly arose the sounds of a desperate hand-to-hand struggle, closely followed by a sharp, triumphant yell.

"Hyar, pards! I hev got 'im!" answered a stentorian voice. "Hulkin' under ther rocks, but I fotched him. Jes— Hell's furies! 'Tain't ther guide!"

At the light of the commotion which ensued, Belzy Golightly dropped safely from the sheltering branches of a dwarfed tree three hundred yards up the gorge, his eyes glowing like livid coals, his breath coming in short, hard gasps.

"Mars' Osman done walked into de midst ob de Philistines, dead sart'in!" he gritted. "I se gwine ter save him, or blow a hole cl'ar frew dem pesky road-agents!"

And tightening his belt, Golightly, with a cocked revolver in either hand, sped down the pass with a series of long, pantherish leaps.

CHAPTER IX.

MAJOR COOL SHOWS HIS HAND.

NEVER had death more swift, sure and terrible confronted the daring adventurer, Major Cool, than at the moment he stood in the pathway of the bomb hurled by Cimarron Jack.

A dastardly attack, shutting off by its swiftness, as well as by the weapon employed, every means of defense; yet the quick-witted sport, warned by the significant words of Leola Grattan, realized his peril, intuitively divined its nature.

And with Major Cool, to think was to act.

Throwing up his hands from the butts of his revolvers, he deftly caught the hissing missile, and with a hasty fling of his right hand, lodged it behind a heavy trunk standing opposite to the door.

A sudden crouching, a sharp spring, and the next instant—just as the bomb exploded—he

was snugly ensconced in the corner formed by a wardrobe built against the wall.

Stunned by the frightful force of the explosive, Major Cool reeled blindly for a moment, then rallied, and with drawn weapons bounded through the smoke, dust and debris toward the hallway, intent on pursuing the abductors of Leola Grattan.

Just as he reached the doorway, the door leading from the hall into the bar-room gave way, and Peg-Leg Pete, followed by a half-score denizens of the place, crowded swiftly upon the adventurer.

"Hal hyar he aire!" roared the landlord excitedly, as he grappled Major Cool in the semi-gloom of the hallway. "You devil! whar's my darter?"

"Gone—follow me!" laconically uttered the sport, shaking off burly Pete Grattan as he would a child. "Two men in mask carried her away."

The teeth of Peg-Leg Pete shot together with a sharp click. Brushing Major Cool aside, he bounded down the hallway to the door of the apartment of the woman Inez.

"Open, Inez—quick!" he roared, as he wrenched vainly at the knob. There was no response. The next instant the door went down before his sturdy shoulders.

The room was deserted. The half-open outer door showed that the abductors of Leola Grattan had made good their escape from the building.

Old Pete Grattan halted, uttering a sound between a curse and a groan. In his mingled rage and dismay he beat a restless tattoo on the hard, barren floor with the end of his wooden leg.

"A'ter 'em, boyees!" he gritted. "A thousand dollars ter ther man w'ot runs 'em ter kiver! Scour ther camp! Ef ye find 'em, Jedge Lynch—Major, will ye lead ther boyees?"

This last sentence was lost to the ears addressed. Already the stranger-sport was in the gloom beyond the doorway at the head of a half-dozen adventurous spirits.

As the last of the Canyonites skurried out into the darkness eager to capture the bold abductors, and lay claim to the reward, Peg-Leg Pete closed and barred the door; then, after a hurried search of the rear part of the hostelry, retraced his steps to the bar-room.

There he secured his Winchester, closed the place, and sallied out into the streets of the camp.

A rod from his doorway he was halted by a wild series of whoops and yells, and the next instant four men, burly, broad-shouldered fellows, rounded the corner of the building, dragging in their midst a captive.

"Hyar's one ov ther sharks!" declared a stentorian voice. "Reckon he'll never skulk in ther dark any more!"

"Itah fer Jedge Lynch!"

"W'ot's he did 'ith ther gal?"

"A rope, Peg-Leg—he must stretch hemp!"

And a score other such cries, mingled in wild confusion, revealed the temper of the crowd.

A dark tragedy was imminent.

"Hold, men! Let slow and sure be the word!" cried Major Cool, in steady, authoritative tones, as he pushed his way through the ranks of the gathering throng. "In this matter we must make no mistake."

"Now, who have you here?"

"One ov ther devils, I'll be bound!" savagely gritted the landlord, peering sharply at the face of the captive. "Take a squint, major, an' see ef he be one ov ther cusses."

"Your double, major—as like as like can be!" uttered a soft, purring voice, almost in the adventurer's ear. "Which is Major Cool, is almost a question!"

"No question at all, my dear fellow," declared the captive with a laugh, in which there was a trace of mockery. "Under that name I hold the belt against all comers. If—"

Ending with a startled oath, the speaker flung his hands aloft. Glittering steel manacles encircled his wrists.

"Your question is answered, High-Card Hank—Major G. Washington Cool is before you!" coldly uttered the stranger-sport, as he turned to face the gambler. "I only borrowed the title for a few short hours. In a camp like Chispa Canyon, two Major Cools couldn't exist long without a collision—and it came even sooner than I had anticipated."

"My cup of happiness is full almost to overflowing. One stroke more—You—"

But High-Card Hank was game—gliding hither and thither through the throng, his marble-like face whiter than ever, his breath coursing

in short, sharp hisses, the pupils of his cruel, cat-like eyes distending with consternation!

Close upon his trail followed the stranger-sport, leaving the captive in the custody of Peg-Leg Pete.

"Ugly Upton was right—he is not Major Cool, but a cursed sleuth hound, leagued with Eylan Buck in his scheme for vengeance," gritted the Faro King, as he sought the shadows and pushed toward the bridge across Pilgrim's Path. "I must fly the camp, for it is death to remain. Once free in these hills with the heiress of Ezra, the Miser, in my power, I can laugh at danger. She is worth a king's ransom, for if it comes to the worst I shall hold her as a hostage—as the price of my liberty!"

Across the bridge, the fleeing zambler halted and looked back. A shadow was on his trail, but he saw it not.

All was commotion in the streets of the camp. Its denizens seemed fired with some fresh excitement.

"The sleuth-hound has made himself known," muttered Hank, turning and seeking the tortuous pathway taken by Cimarron Jack and his captive. "So long, Chispa Canyon!"

He strode rapidly ahead, yet with such stealth as to create scarcely a sound. The Nemesis-like shadow followed him, step by step, with unerring precision, patient and tireless.

High-Card Hank was doomed!

Onward he pushed, looking neither to the right nor to the left, his head bared, his evil brain busy with his precious future.

Suddenly he started, and with a muttered oath sunk to the ground. He had reached a point almost opposite the camp. The trail before him was a glare of lurid light!

"The bomb has done its work—the Lay-out is in flames!" he muttered, staring down into Chispa Canyon. "So be it! While they fight fire I am safe from pursuit. The gully is but a few rods distant—let me once reach it, and the way to the cave is clear."

Flat upon his face, he dragged himself slowly along the tortuous way, anon peering down into the camp or to the rear over his shoulder.

Five minutes rolled by. Then he deftly parted the curtain of vines and with a gliding, serpentine motion entered the narrow gulch into which Cimarron Jack had disappeared a short while before.

"Jack!"

A dark form seated upon a narrow ledge in the side of the gully slipped down to a standing posture, confronting the intruder.

"Hank?"

The gambler breathed a sigh of relief.

"Did you get the girl?"

"Yas, Cap, I got ther gal!"

"She is here?"

"Yas, Cap, she is hyar!"

Something in the voice of the speaker seemed to create in High-Card Hank a feeling of uneasiness. With an upward fling of his hand, he parted the mass of foliage veiling the place.

"Ha! you are not—"

"Too late, Cap! I've got you!"

An oath slipped from between the hard-set teeth of the gambler. A brace of "sixes" stared him in the face. He was trapped!

A light footfall, a ripping, tearing sound—and the curtain of vines abruptly parted, flooding the place with light. In the aperture stood a slender, sinewy form, a glittering weapon raised in each hand.

"Easy, now—both of you!" enunciated a cool, quiet voice—the voice of the stranger-sport, the bogus Major Cool. "The quiver of an eyelash may let slip the dogs of war!"

The shadow had materialized. The race of High-Card Hank was run!

"I pass!" he muttered, disconsolately, as he raised his empty hands. "I hold neither ace, face nor trump! The game is yours."

"We'll divide the spoils, Detective Dan Gilbert!" uttered a crisp young voice—that of the second occupant of the gully. "Reckon he was my meat!"

"And you are—"

"Fighting Frank, the Featherweight!"

High-Card Hank gritted his teeth in silent rage.

CHAPTER X.

CAPTAIN TRACKLESS BAFFLED.

"EYLAN BUCK, your doom is sealed! You have looked your last on earth, for here in this cavern you must die!"

The speaker was the redoubtable Captain Trackless—the party addressed, Old Buckeye.

"Die, Ezra Grimshaw! Wal, mebbe, 'Twon't do, ye know, ter kalkilate too cluss on that 'are-leetle p'int—sarkumstances alter cases!"

Pinioned hand and foot, the giant spy lay flat on his back in the center of the cave overlooking the basin retreat of the Trail Tigers. That he had been subjected to rough, even brutal treatment was obvious at a glance. His clothing was torn to shreds; clots of blood and numerous dark bruises lent to his face a peculiarly grisly look.

A single candle on the narrow stone ledge behind the chief of the outlaws partially dispelled the gloom of the place.

On the couch of skins at one side reclined Aurelia Osman, securely bound.

In a degree, the raid of the Trail Tigers had been successful. Not only had they captured Old Buckeye and recaptured the girl, but they had also rifled the coffers of the House of Gold of their yellow treasures.

Little cared Captain Trackless what action the enraged Canyonites might take in retaliation. One stroke more, and he and his followers could shift their scene of operations and put themselves beyond the reach of vengeance.

That stroke was the abduction of Leola Grattan. Foiled in his first attempt to secure the girl, Captain Trackless was only the more determined to carry out his fell design, and to that end five picked men had been sent back to the gold-camp immediately after he had encountered Bunco Ben and his captives on the silver trail.

Monte Jack, a desperado of unusual cunning, was at the head of the detachment, and the outlaw chief hadn't the least doubt that the attempt would be crowned with a full measure of success.

And yet it was with difficulty that he curbed his impatience after his arrival in the basin. The escape of the Featherweight was by no means reassuring, and when an hour later Bunco Ben rode into camp, empty-handed and with three empty saddles, and reported two or more hostile strangers in the pass, the chief lost all self-restraint, and after a torrent of profanity hastened up to the cavern to assure himself that his remaining captives were being properly guarded.

Ugly Upton was the sentry on duty, and when Captain Trackless entered the cave he forthwith betook himself to the ledge outside.

Glaring down at the discolored face of his half-brother, the chief, in tones fairly seething with passion, gave utterance to that terrible declaration:

"Eylan Buck, your doom is sealed! You have looked your last on earth, for here in this cavern you must die!"

The nonchalant retort of Old Buckeye did not fall short of its purpose. A startled look crept into the face of the road-agent, and he swept a swift glance around the dark recesses of the place.

"Ho! ho!" chuckled Eylan Buck, with apparent satisfaction. "Ther guilty shall flee, when no man pursueth!"

"Hold your tongue—or you may lose it," uttered Captain Trackless, or Ezra Grimshaw, a mad light dancing in his wicked black eyes. "I did not come here to trifle with you, but to warn you of your fate."

"For years you have hung upon my trail, hounding me from point to point, seeking to visit your vengeance upon me for Paul Parkerton's dark deed—for *he*, not I, murdered Ezra, the Miser!"

The blood receded from the bronzed face of Old Buckeye, and his half-closed eyes, filled with a peculiarly intense, lurid light, fixed themselves in a malevolent stare on the face of Ezra Grimshaw.

"You devil! ye might die 'ith thet lie on yer lips afore I c'd see a mo'sel ov truth in it!" he slowly enunciated, each word seeming to cost him a powerful effort. "We aire ther children ov one mother; *you* war born ten years later than I, an' under a lucky star; *you* hev had ther advantages ov book-larnin' an' s'ch, while I know only ther forest, ther plain an' ther camp. But on ther mountain top an' in ther valley, in ther woods an' on ther runnin' streams, I hev read Nature's book—I'arned ter know ther good from ther bad, guilt from innocence!"

"You aire a devil unhung, Ezra Grimshaw! Et aire useless ter shift yer burden ov guilt ter ther shoulders ov Paul Parkerton, bad as he aire, fer I hev tracked ye step by step an' with links stronger than steel fastened ther murder ov our uncle on ye!"

"An' I can't forget thet ther knife which pierced ther miser's heart did not stop thar. It killed our mother!"

"Stop!" burst forth Grimshaw, petulantly.

"Your ravings are but the vapoing of a madman. I had no hand in the deed—am innocent of its awful consequences!"

"Umph!" sneeringly ejaculated Old Buckeye. "I s'pose ye didn't kidnap ther gal hyar, ter marry her an' get ther money ov yer uncle?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Oh! in course not! Don't know thar aire sech a pusson as Carleton Osman, an' thet his real name aire Peter Dauthett, do you? Never entered yer head thet this hyargal war Osman's darter—or Louise Dauthett—and that by ther will ov ther Miser she aire his heiress, did it?"

"I don't know anything of the kind," protested Grimshaw, a crafty gleam appearing in his averted eyes. "It is preposterous to speak of Osman and Dauthett as one. Even the girl will say as much."

"P'rhaps she—"

"You aire wanted below, cap'n—at once!" interrupted Ugly Upton, suddenly appearing at the cavern entrance, a perturbed look on his evil visage.

The chief of the Trail Tigers started uneasily. Without a word he turned and strode out of the place.

Ugly Upton seated himself just within the cave, his back to the entrance.

"Good riddance!" muttered Old Buckeye, as the footfalls of the giant outlaw died away.

The mountain detective was in a bad box, and he knew it. Escape was out of the question so long as the sentry was on duty. Yet he was of a sanguine temperament, and hoped for the best. He was troubled more for the girl than for himself.

He gazed curiously at her pure oval face. A sudden thrill shot through his aching fibers. Her black eyes, twinkling like stars in the dull semi-gloom, were fixed on some object beyond Ugly Upton. Her expression was one of breathless suspense—of intense hope!

Old Buckeye closed one eye reflectively. What could Aurelia Osman have seen? Something betokening a speedy rescue, the mountain detective concluded, and his eyes again sought her face. But the long lashes concealed her glorious orbs—her visage was marble in its pallor!

The ensuing moment was one almost of torture to Eylan Buck. A single glance at Ugly Upton would have revealed the cause of the girl's strange agitation; but, were the sentry ~~menaced~~, the action, mayhap, would warn him of his peril and defeat the movement afloat for the rescue of the captives.

Ere this thought had taken definite shape in the brain of the detective, his doubts were set at rest.

A dull blow, the sound of a falling body, and into the cavern leaped Carleton Osman, closely followed by Belzy Golightly—each with cocked revolvers in hand!

"Father!" exclaimed the fair captive.

"Here, my child, with faithful Belzy, to take you from this place," tenderly replied Carleton Osman, as he severed her pinions and lifted her to her feet. "Belzy—Whom have we here?"

"A frien', I s'pect, Mars' Osman," the black returned, as he applied his keen knife to the last of the thongs confining Eylan Buck. "Anyhow, he am no frien' ob de outlaws."

"A friend ter honest men—a foe ter all others," the detective averred, as he scrambled to his feet. "But we can't discuss sech leetle p'int's now—we must *work* ef we expect ter git away from hyar 'ith hull hides."

"I agree with you there," said Carleton Osman, closely scanning the recesses of the cavern, as the detective glided toward the silent form of Ugly Upton. "There must be an outlet to this place besides the one leading to the basin."

"Yer armise aire kerrect; thar's a passage leadin' up thro' ther rocks," returned Old Buckeye, as he coolly possessed himself of the weapons of the dead sentry. "In ten minutes we ken be out ov—HARK!"

The word of warning came sharply, and even as he spoke, the detective motioned the party to retire to one of the numerous passages.

The next instant he bounded swiftly after them, his weapons drawn and ready for action.

"Quick!—ther chief an' a number ov his men aire near at hand!" he announced, guardedly. "Foller me! We must reach ther ladder leadin' above afore they enter ther cave, or we aire lost!"

Little need to urge the fugitive to quicken their steps. With flying feet they skurried toward the ladder, reaching it not a moment too soon, for as Old Buckeye mounted the bottom rung the deep voice of Captain Trackless rung through the place in notes of alarm.

But, the giant outlaw was too late. He

reached the passage just as Belzy Golightly, the last of the escaping quartette, disappeared through the opening at the top of the cave.

And then, as a means of effectually cutting off immediate pursuit, Old Buckeye grasped the end of the ladder and deftly drew it out of cave.

"Oho!" he chuckled, as he threw the ladder aside and replaced the stone over the opening. "Afore ther Trail Tigers git out ov thar we'll be in Chispa Canyon. All in all, we've had mighty slim chanches—but hyar we aire!"

"An' thar ye stay—dead or alive—jes' es ye want it!" interpolated a hoarse but triumphant voice. "Ye're o'ny out ov ther fryin' pan inter fire!"

Confronting Eylan and his companions, and scarcely three paces distant, were four men—desperate-looking fellows and thoroughly armed.

"Who are you? What do you mean?" testily demanded Carleton Osman.

"Thet I am Monte Jack, leftenant ov ther Trail Tigers!" was the significant response.

CHAPTER XI.

THE GRIM MESSENGER.

NEVER in all his eventful career had High-Card Hank felt so utterly crestfallen as at the moment he stood silent and helpless under the muzzles of the weapons in the hands of the bogus Major Cool and Frank, the Featherweight.

There wasn't even a fighting chance remaining. He was cornered, and his only alternative was to yield.

The next moment he was securely manacled. Then Frank and the detective warmly shook hands.

"What success, Detective Gilbert?" queried the former.

"Best in the world," uttered the detective, with a light laugh. "Not twenty minutes ago, right down in Chispa Canyon, I met the real and original Major G. Washington Cool."

"Indeed! You—"

"Same fix!" Detective Gilbert replied, nodding significantly at the irons on the wrists of the entrapped gambler. "Just as easy, too!"

"Mebbe you can fix this one in the same way," suggested Frank, parting the foliage at his side and revealing Cimarron Jack, bound hand and foot.

"Can't see the necessity," the detective averred, dryly. "But where is that fellow's captive—Miss Grattan?"

"Here, major," and Leola Grattan stepped into view, extending her hand. "You escaped uninjured?"

"Uninjured, Miss Grattan—thanks to your timely warning of a moment before. In fact, the only real harm resulting from the dastardly attack was the shattering and firing of the building."

"And that is overbalanced by the fact that we have secured the arch-plotter, High-Card Hank, and his tools—Cimarron Jack here being one. Another lies dead by the bridge."

"Have you been harmed?"

"Only frightened," and the girl's dark eyes fell under the detective's warm gaze.

"We had best go down into the Canyon," suggested the Featherweight. "Miss Osman has again fallen into the hands of Captain Trackless, and her rescue should by all means be effected at an early moment."

The young guide's lapse from the border dialect did not escape the detective.

"I agree with you," he returned. "The affair is serious and demands immediate attention."

High-Card Hank and Cimarron Jack were handcuffed together, then turned over to the Featherweight. Detective Gilbert with Leola Grattan brought up the rear.

The flames were yet at their height when the five crossed the bridge into Chispa Canyon. As luck would have it, Peg-Leg Pete was the first man the detective and his companions encountered.

With a hoarse whoop of joy, the landlord stumped forward and clasped his daughter in a bear-like embrace.

The next instant there was a sudden swaying and surging of the crowd, portending an outbreak of some kind. Ere even keen-eyed Detective Gilbert could realize its nature, five men broke away from the throng and swiftly hurled themselves upon Peter Grattan and his daughter.

The struggle which ensued was of the briefest possible duration. Before either the detective or the Featherweight could lift a hand to thwart the desperadoes, Peg-Leg Pete lay gasping on the ground, the life-blood gushing in a crimson tide

from a murderous knife-wound in his back, while Leola Grattan, in the midst of her five captors, was being hurried toward the bridge!

"Quick!" shouted Dan Gilbert, springing after the daring outlaws, a revolver in each hand.

"After those devils, for they must not escape!"

"Foller—an' ther gal's life shall pay fer it!" came back from the bridge in fierce, menacing tones. "I speak for Captain Trackless, ther Trail Tiger!"

Captain Trackless!

Dan Gilbert halted, a feeling akin to despair tearing at his heart. He knew the threat was no empty one—that a move just then on the part of her friends might end the life of Leola Grattan!

"Easy, Dan—we'll get 'em yet!" uttered Fighting Frank, at his side. "Look to your captives and the landlord there—I'll arrange for pursuit," and turning, he glided away.

At a glance it was obvious that the seal of death was upon the brow of Peter Grattan as he lay gasping on a rude cot in one of Chispa Canyon's cabins.

At his side, ministering to his wants with the tenderness of a woman, was Detective Gilbert. Just without the door was a strong posse of the camp's denizens, all armed to the teeth, under command of the Featherweight.

The latter entered the cabin. His voice was scarcely above a whisper as he uttered the word:

"Dan!"

Leaving his patient a moment, the detective approached the guide, his face wearing an expression of unutterable gravity.

"How is he?" queried Frank, with an inclination of his head indicating the wounded landlord.

"Failing fast," was the guarded response. "You are ready to take the trail?"

"Yes, with twenty men at my command. At one stroke we will rescue the two girls and wipe the Trail Tigers from the face of the earth, or ourselves fall."

"We watched the course taken by the murderous wretches, and will trail them with dogs. They have but a few minutes the start."

"I would that I could join you; but while my heart is with you, my duty is here—and here I must stay. May success attend you!"

The hands of the two men met in a warm clasp. In that moment the Featherweight realized that Detective Gilbert had given his heart and his happiness into the keeping of Leola Grattan.

"Have no fear—I will bring her back, Dan," he uttered softly.

Then the two men separated—Fighting Frank to take his place at the head of his little command, the detective turning to the couch of Peter Grattan.

"Hello! major, is it you?" gasped the latter, opening his eyes and staring up into the face of the detective, as he felt the latter's cool hand upon his forehead. "Good! You are a white man, major; and now that the game is closed and my checks are called in, I must say to you what I have said to no other living man."

"I am sure you will not betray my confidence, and certain that you will see justice done my child—for she will be rescued, major—I feel it, I know it!"

"She will be rescued," repeated the detective.

"Yes, I am sure of it," meekly declared the moribund, a feverish sparkle appearing in his gray eyes. "But I am failing, major, and must speak quickly, or never."

"In northeastern Kentucky, some years ago, a most fearful murder was committed, one Ezra Grimschaw—better known as Ezra the Miser—being the victim. It had long been supposed that the miser kept large sums of money concealed about his premises, and as was natural, it was assumed that this wealth was the motive."

"But such was not the case."

"The crime, committed in the dead of night, was a most mysterious one, and only a rigid and thorough search on the part of the authorities brought to light a clew."

"And that clew was a knife—the weapon with which the miser had been almost literally hacked to pieces. It was of peculiar form, and was known to belong to one Peter Dauthett, a brother-in-law of the miser."

"Then, too, the two men were known to be on bad terms, and as a result of the finding of the blood-stained blade Dauthett was straightway set down as the murderer."

"He fled—taking with him his only child, a daughter. For years he roamed hither and thither, seeking the wilder and more remote outskirts of civilization—ever dreading capture

and punishment for a crime which he had not committed—of which he was wholly innocent."

"In all these wanderings his child clung to him, never questioning him as to the future or concerning the past—ignorant of the real cause of his restlessness, of the haunting fear weighing upon him."

"And in these years she developed from a delicate child into robust womanhood—as good and pure as beautiful. If—"

A crimson tide welled from the pale lips of the moribund, for the moment checking utterance. Then, with what seemed a supreme effort, he rallied, and in quick, sharp tones exclaimed:

"Major, your hand, I am Peter Dauthett—Leola is my daughter. I am dying now, but on my person you will find the—"

Again his voice failed. His head fell back. He was dying.

The detective bent over him, clasping his hand. Dauthett's eyes opened slightly and rested on the anxious, pitying face above him. His lips moved, and he muttered:

"Swear it, major—you will—take Leo—"

A gasp, a ghastly rattle deep in his throat, and the low voice failed. Peter Dauthett was dead!

CHAPTER XII.

A TRYING ORDEAL.

"YAS, sir-ee! I am Monte Jack, an' es I kin figger et out I hold ther winnin' hand," reiterated the lieutenant of the Trail Tigers, after a moment of profound silence, as he stood confronting Old Buckeye and his companions at the mouth of the alcove in the rocks. "Ther on'y question now aire, do ye see ther p'int?"

"Oh! we kin see ther p'int fast enuff!" grimly averred the giant spy. "But ef I onderstand ther matter, ther's more'n one prong ter ther dilemmur. 'Tain't a sure thing which side'll hold ther age in ther leetle deefickulty a-brewin'."

"True as gospel, ye old sinner—every word of it!" declared a voice in the darkness beyond Monte Jack and his followers. "Count us in, fer we're as famished fer a scrimmage as a hoydooan of starved wildcats!"

The clicking of numerous revolver locks accompanied the warlike declaration.

"Thet's Fightin' Frank, fer a billion dollars in gold!" ejaculated Old Buckeye, fairly quivering with delight.

Startled beyond measure, Monte Jack uttered an oath. He was between two fires.

"Easy, now!" cautioned the Featherweight, a menacing ring noticeable in his smooth tones. "You're covered—every mother's son of you. You are our meat, an' salt-peter won't keep you from spoiling if you attempt to move a step in any direction."

"You bet it won't!" chimed in the mountain detective. "Better throw up your hand, Monte Jack—we've got ther dead sinch on ye!"

"I wasn't born a fool!" curtly observed the outlaw. "Ther gal from camp's right hyar, an' ye dar'n't fire—she's no more lead-proof than I be."

"Yes—but you haven't got the girl from Chispa Canyon," quietly returned the Featherweight. "I fixed *that* some minutes ago. She's half-way to camp ere this."

A howl of rage escaped the Trail Tiger. His captive was indeed missing, and with her one of his men.

At the same instant, Carleton Osman gently, yet quickly pushed his daughter out of range—sheltering her in a dark niche in the walls.

"Drop!" hissed Old Buckeye. "It's a-comin'—throw your lead well up."

Not a breath too soon, that sharply, yet cautiously, uttered warning, for, with a yell which echoed and re-echoed among the rocks, Monte Jack flung himself into the alcove, a stream of fire leaping from the muzzle of each weapon, his eyes blazing fitfully, his sharp white teeth almost meeting through his nether lip.

Flung himself forward—to drop in a lifeless heap, a ball from the unerring "six" of the giant spy through his brain.

Nor was that all. A series of flashes ran along the Featherweight's line—a sharp, crashing sound, a yell, an oath, a groan—a deadly volley from Old Buckeye and his companions, and the vengeful struggle was ended. Monte Jack and his men had chosen between Judge Lynch and instant death—the latter had been their portion.

"Reckon ther naixt thing, now thet ther gals aire out ov ther way, aire ter guv ther Trail Tigers a leetle tussle," observed Old Buckeye,

as the footsteps of Carleton Osman and Belzy Golightly, with the former's daughter and Leola Grattan, died away down the ravine. "We kin sorter drop in an' take 'em by s'prise."

"Ther quicker ther better," declared one of the Canyonites. "Seems ter me they hev bin let monkey 'round long 'nuff. An' then we kem up ter clean 'em out."

And so it was quickly decided that the attack should be made, entering the cabin by means of the ladder.

After a brief reconnoissance, Old Buckeye announced that the way was clear. Then the ladder was lowered, and one after another of the strong posse descended into the lair of Captain Trackless.

They found the cavern deserted, but the outlaw stronghold below was in a turmoil of excitement.

"Makin' ready fer another swoop down onter Chispa Canyon," muttered the giant spy, wrathfully. "Look ter yer weepens, pards, an' foller in Injun file. We'll guv ther blasted thieves a fit ov sickness."

Accordingly the determined men filed stealthily downward, and out across the pocket, and, undetected, ranged themselves with leveled weapons directly across the pathway of the outlaw clan.

"We ain't a minute too soon," observed the Featherweight, taking his stand beside the giants. "They're mounted."

"An' hyar they come," as cautiously returned Old Buckeye. "Steady, lads, an' at ther chirp ov a cricket, fire!"

The next moment the signal was given. Captain Trackless and his men were at close range. A sharp volley, a triumphant shout, and the ambuscading party dashed forward to a hand-to-hand struggle with their startled foes.

In less than the time it takes to describe it, the struggle was ended; the mountain bandits were literally wiped out. And foremost among the slain the victors came upon the body of Captain Trackless, or Ezra Grimschaw, his heart pierced with a pistol-ball.

The vow of Eylan Buck had been terribly fulfilled.

CHAPTER XIII.

JUDGE LYNCH'S COURT.

OVER Chispa Canyon a strange hush held sway. Massed in a hollow square on the principal street of the camp, their faces grim and stern in the dull, red glow of all that remained of the Lay-out and the House of Gold, stood the denizens of the place, intent on the proceedings of the court of Judge Lynch.

For that terrible tribunal was in session. To the right of the center of the hollow square, mounted upon the head of an empty barrel, was no less a personage than Old Buckeye, the giant spy. Before him, securely manacled, were High-Card Hank, Major Cool and Cimarron Jack, under guard of four brawny fellows with drawn revolvers. Facing this party were Fighting Frank, Detective Gilbert and Carleton Osman.

"Paul Parkerton, alias High-Card Hank, you aire charged, first, 'ith bein' an accomplice in ther murder ov one Ezra Grimschaw, known also es Ezra, ther Miser, sum years ago in Kaintuck; second, 'ith havin' instigated one Captain Trackless ter make an attack on ther train ov Carleton Osman, et Big Gap, thet his darter mought be stolen; third, 'ith havin' putt up a like job on Detective Dan Gilbert, under the belief thet he was Major Cool, murder bein' ther object; fourth, 'ith havin' arter findin' thet Aurelia Osman war not ther gal ye sought—ther heiress ov Ezra, ther Miser—putt up a second job ter slay Gilbert at ther Lay-out, an' abduct Leola Grattan, otherwise Louise Dauthett, ther real heiress; an' etcetery, etcetery, yer many offenses bein' too numerous ter mention in detail. W'ot hev ye got ter say fer yerself?"

And as Old Buckeye concluded, he looked steadily into the cruel, catlike orbs of the captive gambler.

"I ain't saying a word," was the cold response. "Breath is too precious just now to idly waste it."

"True! Es presidin' officer ov this court, I sentence ye ter be hanged by ther neck till ye aire deader'n a mackerel. Ther only pity aire thet ye hev'n't a neck fer each crime."

"Now, Major George Washington Cool, your case aire naixt on ther docket. Ye aire charged 'ith a multitude ov offenses, chief among which is an attempt upon ther life ov Aurelia Osman, becase she refused an offer ov marriage from ye. W'ot defense do ye offer?"

"I deny the charge," promptly answered Major Cool.

"Oh! ye do? Carleton Osman, will ye tell ther court w'at ye know about ther matter?"

"I have simply this to say," returned Osman. "The attempt was made at Golden City, and, when thwarted, the prisoner swore to accomplish his design, sooner or later. Accordingly I employed Detective Gilbert here, and his friend, the Featherweight, to take charge of the case—the first to hunt down the wretch, the second to act as guide until we had reached our destination. Major Cool is guilty of the offense, as charged."

"Halter No. 2!" crisply uttered Old Buckeye.

"Es fer ye, Cimarron Jack, I sentence ye ter hang 'ithout trial. Thar's no chaine fer ye ter git ther benefit ov a doubt—ye aire too well known. So, now, for'ard 'ith 'em, boyees, an' hang 'em high. Ther fu'st tree beyond ther bridge will do."

With a wild yell the Canyonites surged out of camp and the terrible decree of Judge Lynch was carried out to the letter!

Little more needs to be told.

Upon the person of Peg-Leg Pete were found documents establishing his identity and removing forever all doubt that he was innocent of the murder of Ezra, the Miser.

In due course of time, Carleton Osman and his daughter, together with the Featherweight and Belzy Golightly, journeyed on to the camp of Nowhar, where Osman had purchased a half in erest in a mine.

The young guide, won from his nomadic life by the dark eyes of Aurelia Osman, eventually secured an interest in the mining property of his former employer. There we leave him.

Louise Dauthett, together with Detective Gilbert and Eylan Buck, returned to her native State, where she succeeded in establishing her claim to the heritage of Ezra, the Miser. Within a year the heiress and the dashing officer were made one by the bonds of wedlock.

Old Buckeye shortly afterward returned to the boundless West, where he yet roams, a friend to the righteous, a terror to the evil-doer.

THE END.

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